Islamic Reference Series

# SPIRITUAL MESSAGE OF ISLAM

EDITED BY: MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI

# Spiritual Message of Islam

**edited by**

**Mohammad Ali Shomali**

*Islamic Reference Series:*

**Vol. 4 Spiritual Message of Islam**

Edited by Mohammad Ali Shomali

First published in Great Britain in 2010

ISBN: 1-904934-16-1

978-1-904934-16-5

*Published by*

**Institute of Islamic Studies**
**Islamic Centre of England**
140 Maida Vale, London W9 1QB
Tel: (44) 0207 604 5500; Fax: (44) 0207 604 4898
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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

In the Name of God,

the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

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My God! Make me completely cut off from all else but You, and enlighten the vision of our hearts with the radiance of looking at You, until the vision of our hearts penetrates the veils of light and reaches the Source of Grandeur and set our spirit to be suspended at the glory of Your sanctity. ("Al-Munājāt al-Sha'bāniyyah" in *Mafātih al-Jinān*)

## Preface

There are three main factors involved in any decision making: knowledge, motivation and power. Knowledge is important in order to make an informed decision. For example, in order to decide to buy a book, we must first *know* what a book is. We must also know what kind of book we want, what language it should be in, what genre and style we prefer and so on. Motivation is important as without it we do not have any desire to make a decision or to perform any action. Lastly, we need the power or ability to make a decision or to act. For example, if we know what type of book is useful for us, and we also have the desire for reading it, but the book is not available, we cannot do what we would like to do or what we are supposed to do.

Therefore, we can only make a decision or perform an action when we have knowledge, motivation and power combined together.

Let us now discuss the role of each of these components in self-development.

Power: We all have the power or ability to make decisions or to take action because we all have free will; no-one is forced to be good or bad, or created wicked. Of course, individual people may have different life experiences or extent of their power or ability. Some people may be more prepared for the spiritual journey due to their upbringing or environment whereas it may be more difficult for other people. However nobody is deprived of the power to become good. Even people in the worst situations can become good. There are many such examples in the Qur'an, such as the wife of Pharaoh who, although she lived with Pharaoh in the same environment as him, yet she was a good believer, so

much so that she became an example for believing men and women. The Qur'an says:

> God draws an[other] example for those who have faith: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord! Build me a home near You in paradise, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his conduct, and deliver me from the wrongdoing lot.' (66:11)

In contrast to this is the example of the son of Prophet Noah. He was under the care of a great Prophet and yet he still did not want to follow the path of his father. Therefore, people have different degrees of readiness, but nobody is forced to be good or bad.

God also judges us according to what we do with what we have been given:

> God does not task any soul beyond its capacity. Whatever [good] it earns is to its benefit, and whatever [evil] it incurs is to its harm. ... (2:286)

> ... God does not task any soul except [according to] what He has given it. God will bring about ease after hardship. (65:7)

Thus, for people who live under circumstances in which they find the spiritual journey difficult, the little that they do may be considered equal to great things done by people who have everything available to them. According to a well-known hadith from Prophet Muhammad, "the most privileged acts are those that are done in greatest difficulty". (*Biḥār al-Anwār,* vol. 67, p. 191) So the power to decide or to act is present to a greater or lesser extent in each one of us, and we will be judged according to our individual capacities and abilities.

Motivation: Like power, the desire for perfection is experienced by all. Human beings have an inherent desire to be goodand have a desire for perfection, for justice, benevolence, honesty, etc. God

has inspired us to distinguish between what is right and wrong and has motivated us to be good. Of course this is so unless a person distorts his nature so much that he considers good things to be bad. Otherwise, there is no obstacle to having the desire for perfection. Of course, the more we proceed on this journey, the greater our desire and determination become and the easier the journey.

There is a comparison between the journey towards God and the one towards Satan. In the beginning, the journey towards God is difficult as we need to resist all temptations, but it becomes easier and easier. However the journey towards Satan is initially easier but then the suffering starts, and day by day it becomes more difficult and painful. This is why on various occasions Prophet Muhammad said: "Heaven is surrounded by difficulties and Hell is surrounded by lust [and lower desires]." (*Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 67, p. 78)

Thus, to a greater or lesser extent we all have the power and motivation for becoming good and embarking on the spiritual journey. Of course, we need to increase our power and our desire as much as possible.

Knowledge: Although the basic knowledge for discerning right from wrong is available to everyone, we still need to endeavour to acquire knowledge and then act accordingly. And amazingly, the more we put into practice what we know, the more we know. We should not be satisfied with whatever basic knowledge we may have. The more we know, the more powerful and determined we become. With knowledge we can choose the best direction and means and we can even strengthen our motivation and power. If we obtain knowledge of the benefits and great outcomes of following the path to God it would be impossible to be pleased with anything else. In the Whispered Prayer of the Lovers, Imam Sajjad (a.s.) says:

> My God, who can have tasted the sweetness of Thy Love, then wanted another in place of Thee? Who can have become intimate with Thy closeness, then wanted to leave Thee?

If someone is able to see, to hear and to feel Godly things he will not be pleased with anything else. So knowledge is very important and with proper knowledge the path is clear and the journey becomes easier.

We need to make deliberate attempts to gain knowledge, especially knowledge about our origin, our present and our future, and the way they interact. So we need to ask ourselves: "what kind of actions can I do today that will help me tomorrow?" and "what kind of negligence today can harm me tomorrow?"

The papers in this volume briefly study some aspects of Islamic Spirituality and provide the readers with some theoretical and practical knowledge that can be of help to them in their spiritual journey. Most of the papers in this volume have been published before in different volumes of the Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue and so, in order to increase their accessibility, they are now published together in this volume. Repeated study of this volume will prove to be most useful, especially after reading *Self-knowledge* (Shomali, 1996 & 2006).

The first paper is entitled "Spiritual Direction: An Islamic Perspective on Self-purification." In this paper, Dr Mohammad Ali Shomali studies the significance of self-purification in Islam and refers to different ways in which the process of self-purification is dealt with in Islamic scriptures. The paper ends with a break down of the spiritual journey and some important practical instructions given by Muslim spiritual masters. The ideas in this paper have been presented to various groups on different continents. In particular, this paper includes ideas which were originally presented as two lectures on Spiritual Direction at

the second and the third Catholic – Shi'a Dialogues in the UK at Ampleforth Abbey in July 2005 and at Worth Abbey in July 2007. It was first published in *A Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue: Ethics in Today's Society* (2008) and is now being published for the second time.

The second paper is entitled "Invocation of God: The Only Way to Human Salvation and Prosperity." In this paper, Ayatollah Muhsin Araki focuses on the issue of remembrance of God and argues that this is the heart of Islamic Spirituality and it is by remembrance of God that human beings can move from darkness to Light and achieve peace, happiness and righteousness. The author also argues that the same fact was emphasised by all Divine Prophets. The paper ends with an elaborate account of the different types and stages of the remembrance of God. This paper was presented at the first stage of the first Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue at Heythrop College, University of London, in July 2003. It was first published in *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (2004) and is now being published for the second time. Ayatollah Araki is the ex-Director of the Islamic Centre of England (London). He currently teaches advanced levels of jurisprudence and exegesis of the Qur'an in the Islamic Seminaries of Qum. His publications include: *Introduction to Islamic Mysticism* (2001), *Foundations of Islamic Government* (2000), *Contemporary Islamic Awakening – Phases and Pioneers* (2000), *Ma'ālim al-Fikr al-Uṣūli al-Jadid* (1999) and *Islamic Epistemology* (1999).

The third paper is entitled "The Principle and Practice of the Remembrance of God: An Islamic Perspective." In this paper, Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi continues the discussion on the remembrance of God and, as does Ayatollah Araki, argues that remembrance of God constitutes the very essence of religious devotion. He introduces remembrance of God as consciousness of the Divine Reality and as the goal of worship in all its various forms and continues by saying that remembrance of God is an engaging contemplative practice which needs to be accomplished and not

just thought about. In addition to the Qur'an, references are made to the hadiths; especially the sayings of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali b. Abi Talib. This paper was presented at the first stage of the Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue at Heythrop College, University of London, in July 2003 and was first published in *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (2004). Dr Shah Kazemi is the founding editor of the *Islamic World Report* and a research associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. His publications include: *Paths of Transcendence: Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart on Transcendent Spiritual Realisation* (2006), *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam* (2001), *Avicenna: Prince of Physicians* (1997) and *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam 'Ali* (2007).

The fourth paper is entitled "Contemplation in Islamic Spirituality." In this paper, Mrs Mahnaz Heydapoor studies the meaning and significance of contemplation in Islamic Spirituality. Based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah, she argues that contemplation adds so much to the value of acts of worship that an hour of contemplative worship is better than one year of worship without contemplation. Referring to a well-known hadith about Abu Dharr, in which most of the worship of Abu Dharr is characterised as contemplation, she argues that a very privileged form of worship is to continuously think about or constantly contemplate God and His Power. The paper continues by referring to the objects of contemplation and ends with some practical suggestions for achieving more fruitful contemplation. This paper was written for the first Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue in July 2003 and was first published in *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (2004). Mrs Mahnaz Heydarpoor is a lecturer at the Jami'at al-Zahra (Islamic Seminary and University for Women, Qum). Her publications include *Love in Christianity & Islam: A Contribution to Religious Ethics* (London: New City, 2002 & 2005).

The fifth paper is entitled "Reflections on Prayer: A Muslim Perspective." In this paper, Dr Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari

studies the significance of prayer in Islamic Spirituality as a form of remembrance of God. He refers to four aspects of the prayer i.e. praise, thanksgiving, asking forgiveness and petition and argues that the nature of prayer can be better understood if we consider representative examples of prayer from the Bible and the Qur'an. He compares the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is recited by a Muslim at least ten times a day, with a prayer of Jesus which is recorded in the Bible (Matthew 6: 9-15). The paper ends a discussion on the educational aspect of prayer and what can actually be learnt from prayer. This paper was presented at the second stage of the first Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue at Ampleforth Abbey in July 2003 and has been first published in *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* (2004). Dr Fanaei is an Associate Professor at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, Qum. His publications include: *Ma'qūl-e Thāni* (1996), *'Ilm-e Ḥuḍūri* (1996), *Dānesh-e Islami wa Dāneshgāh-e Islami* (1998), *Manzelat-e Zan dar Andishe-ye Islami* (1998) and *Ta'ahhud be Ḥaqiqat* (1999).

The sixth and final paper is entitled "Religion and Mysticism." In this paper, Dr Abolfazl Sajedi starts by defining religion and mysticism and then studies the position of mysticism in divine religions and in Islam in particular. He compares secular mysticism with religious mysticism and refers to the advantages of religious mysticism and the services that religion can offer to mysticism. This paper was originally written in Farsi and was translated into English for this volume. Dr Sajedi is an Associate Professor at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, Qum. His publications include: *Falsafe-ye Zabān-e Dini, Zabane Din wa Qur'an* and *Ravān Shenāsi Rushd.*

I would like to thank all who have contributed to this volume and pray for their success in both their personal and academic lives. I should also thank Mrs. Saajida Rhemtulla for editing and proofreading the whole work and making valuable comments. I would also like to thank Hujjatul-Islam wa'l-Muslimin Moezzi,

the Director of the Islamic Centre of England for his support and encouragement. And last, but by no means least, I should thank God the Almighty for His Guidance and favour upon us in the past and the present.

Mohammad Ali Shomali

November 2009

# Spiritual Direction: An Islamic Perspective on Self-purification

**Mohammad Ali Shomali**

There are two ways in which spiritual direction can be given by spiritual instructors: one is to have a common audience in mind and give general instructions that can more or less benefit everyone, and the other is to bear in mind particular conditions of an individual or a homogeneous group of people and give specific instructions. Focusing on the latter attitude, this paper, will first study the significance of self-purification in Islam and will them go on to refer to different approaches to self-purification. This will be followed by a breakdown of the process of self-purification. Finally five general instructions given by Muslim spiritual mentors will be introduced.

## Significance of Self-Purification

In the Glorious Qur'an, after swearing eleven times, God emphasises the purification of the human soul as follows:

> *"I swear by the sun and its brilliance and the moon when it follows the sun and the day when it makes manifest the sun (and her beauty) and the night when it covers the sun and the heaven and Him who made it and the earth and Him who extended it and the soul and Him who made it complete, then He inspired it to understand what*

*is right and wrong for it. He will indeed be successful who purifies it and he will indeed fail whoever pollutes and corrupts it."* (91:1-10)

Purification of the soul is a prerequisite for closeness to God. Indeed, the whole point of morality and spirituality is to purify one's soul. It is only then that the soul starts shining, receiving and reflecting utmost radiation and light from God. To meet God, Who is the Most Pure, purity has to be achieved. It is impossible to be polluted and then try to go towards God. This is similar to the way in which someone who is going to a place where people are smart, well-dressed and beautiful will first make himself clean and tidy and will put on good clothes to make himself compatible with them. Otherwise they would say that he will spoil their gathering and damage their reputation.

The main task of all the Prophets and the aim behind all their endeavours in teaching the divine message was to help people to purify their souls. The Glorious Qur'an says:

*"Certainly God conferred a great favour upon the believers when He raised among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His communications and purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the wisdom, although before that they were surely in manifest error."* (3:164)[1]

**Different Approaches to Self-Purification**

In Islamic literature there are different ways in which the process of self-purification has been characterised:

**1. Combat with the self:** According to this approach, self-purification is an internal battle against the enemy within. It is narrated in a very well-known hadith that once, in Medina,

Prophet Muhammad saw a group of his companions who had won a battle approaching him. The Holy Prophet said:

> «مرحبا بقوم قضوا الجهاد الاصغر وبقى عليهم الجهاد الاكبر!
> فقيل: يارسول الله، ماالجهاد الاكبر؟ قال صلى الله عليه و آله:
> جهاد النفس.»

> "Well done! Welcome to those people who have completed the minor struggle and on whom the greater struggle is still incumbent."[2]

The companions had defeated their enemies in a severe battle and had been prepared to give up the dearest thing to them: their life, to defend Islam. They were astonished and wondered what could be greater than that. The Holy Prophet replied: '*Jihad al-nafs.*' That is, to struggle with your own self.[3]

To fight an internal enemy is the greater struggle because it is more difficult. When an enemy is found inside it is more dangerous and more difficult to defeat. An internal civil war is more difficult to face than war against an external foreign enemy on one's borders. It is much more difficult to expel someone who has occupied one's house than to repel someone who is only outside it. An internal enemy knows all the secrets. He knows the weak points and the strong points and he knows exactly how to 'play' the game. An internal enemy is always present and does not allow any rest. Hence, this is a very difficult and complex battle. Of course, despite all the challenges that have to be faced during the struggle, in the end it is not so difficult as to be impossible. God will guide and make it easy for those who sincerely want to win. It is of the utmost importance though, that when something is known, it is put into practice. If a person practices what he knows, God will increase his knowledge and enlighten him about the things he does not know. If human beings practise even the small things they know, it will illuminate the path before them.

**2. Medicine:** Another approach is to consider spirituality as a kind of medicine for the soul or spirit. Spiritual problems are described as illnesses and special medicines are required for their treatment. The human soul is a patient in need of a cure, in need of medicine. Just like the body, the soul may also become ill. Unfortunately, the most difficult sort of illness is the suffering deep inside. There are twelve verses in the Qur'an that talk about a group of people who suffer from "disease in their hearts". This disease may be increased by God because some people do not want to be cured and instead, insist on being ill. For example, one verse of the Qur'an states:

> *"In their hearts is a disease and God has increased their disease."* (2:10)

The Qur'an also talks about hearts which are healthy and pure:

> *"Do not disgrace me on the day when people are revived, the day on which neither money nor children can help, except the one who comes to Allah with a healthy (pure) heart."* (26:87-89)

This is the prayer of Prophet Abraham. In verses 37:83 and 37:84, God goes on to say that this request was granted:

> *"Indeed, Abraham was among his [i.e. Noah's] followers, when he came to his Lord with a healthy (pure) heart."*

Thus, it can be understood that having a pure and healthy heart is so important that someone like Prophet Abraham, the father of all monotheistic religions, asked God for it. Indeed, this is the only thing that will be useful on the Day of Judgement when neither children nor money will be of any benefit (26:88 & 89). In *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 338, Imam Ali says:

> "One of the catastrophes that may occur is poverty, but more difficult and worse than poverty

is illness. And worse than illness of the body is illness of the heart."

**3. Journey:** In Islamic literature, spirituality is also described as a journey. The human being is a wayfarer. He has embarked on a journey away from God and is now going back to Him. All human beings have been created by God and this creation is a sort of separation from their origin. However, God has opened the chance to return to Him. The Qur'an says: *"Truly we belong to God and to Him we will return."* (2:156) The destination is clear. But in order to reach it, care must be taken about the chosen direction. If the right path is chosen, the destination will certainly be reached. However, if the wrong path is chosen, the ultimate destination will not be reached and it is possible to go farther and farther away from it. Of course, in the end all human beings will meet God. The Glorious Qur'an says:

> *"O man, you are trying hard to reach your Lord and you will finally meet Him."* (84:6)

If this is the case, it may seem like there is nothing to worry about because everyone has come from a good place and there is a good destination ahead. But the human being's status when he meets God is of the utmost importance. There are two states in which God can be reached. The first is to reach Him while He is happy with the human being and the second is to reach Him while He is angry with him. Human beings are among the very few creatures whose levels of perfection are not fixed, that is, they have been given the capacity to upgrade or degrade themselves.

Thus, the spiritual journey consists of the human trying to increase his closeness and proximity to God. It should be noted that God is always close to His creatures, but the same is not necessarily the case vice versa. For example, there are many verses in the Qur'an which indicate that God is with human beings, but humans are not with God or even close to God by

default or nature. They must make efforts to reach a position in which they can get closer and closer to God and, as suggested by the Glorious Qur'an, "meet" Him. Mystics normally speak of the possibility of losing one's selfhood, limits and boundaries and then becoming identified with God. This concept is not being commented on here, but in any case it seems obvious that it is possible to get closer and closer to God and this is what is meant by 'returning to God.'

There are numerous detailed accounts of the different stations or stages of this journey, such as *Awsaf al-Ashraf* by Nasir al-Din Tusi and *Manazil al-Sa'irin* by Abdullah Ansari.

## A Glance at the Process of Self-Purification

Without going into great depth, a breakdown of the whole process of self-purification can be summed up as follows:

### 1. Wakefulness or Attention to One's Self

The very first stage is wakefulness (*yaqzah*). Many scholars like Imam Khomeini in his book *Jihad-e Akhbar* (The Major Jihad), which is a compilation of lectures given by him to the seminarians, state that the first stage of self-purification is wakefulness. Indeed, some mystics believe that this is only a preliminary stage and that the first stage actually comes after wakefulness. However, there is no doubt that this is the beginning. The departure point is to become awake. It can be argued that everyone is already 'awake', but this is a different kind of wakefulness. According to a hadith, "people are asleep and only wake when they die." When they die, they wake and never go to sleep again. But at that point, it is too late.

There is a beautiful analogy regarding the human situation: life in this world is compared to the rope that a person who has fallen into a deep well is holding onto. If he loses this rope he will be finished. There are two mice, one white and one black at the top of the well who are gnawing on the rope. The time will definitely come when the rope will break. The mice are very determined and will not go away. This is the human situation. The rope represents life. The white mouse represents day and the black mouse represents night. Day and night are constantly 'gnawing' away at life and sooner or later the human will 'fall' and die.

## 2. Knowing One's Self

After becoming awake, it is the responsibility of the human to try and know him better and find out what resources, opportunities and options are available to him. This is what is called 'self-knowledge' (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) and is considered to be "the most beneficial knowledge." Human beings need to know themselves properly. The human potential for perfection is often underestimated but there is an endless possibility for perfection. In addition, many people are too easily satisfied. People should be more determined and have greater expectations. They should never be satisfied because if they are satisfied with small things, then they will lose out and may not even achieve those small things.

## 3. Taking Care of One's Self

After wakefulness and self-knowledge, the human being needs self-care. It is not enough simply to know things; knowledge should serve by being put into practice. For example, if someone knows that smoking kills but they have no concern for their health and so continue to smoke, there is no benefit in their knowledge. In fact it just makes them more responsible because

they know. Of course, the answer to this is not to avoid learning. To say "I did not know" is not a good enough excuse. Things must be learnt and then put into practice and this is where self-care becomes necessary.

However, there is something that often happens to people in this state. When they become conscious and sensitive to spiritual issues, then unfortunately, instead of being concerned with their own piety, instead of being mostly busy with their own problems, they become judgmental about other people. There is a story in *Mathnawi* by Rumi about four people who had an appointment with a king immediately after the midday prayers. They were very concerned that they should not lose the opportunity to meet the king and did not want to be late. They therefore decided to say their prayers quickly and then proceed to meet the king. These were religious people who normally used to go to the mosque to say their prayers, but they nevertheless faced problems as the story will. The four went to the mosque together and started praying. However, while they were saying their prayers, the person who calls for prayer (*mu'adhdhin*) came into the mosque to climb the minaret. The people became unsure and began to wonder whether they had started their prayers too early or whether that day the mu'adhdhin had arrived late that day. While praying, one of them asked the mu'adhdhin whether the time for prayers had already arrived or not. The second person looked at him angrily and asked why he had spoken while praying, because whether the time had arrived or not he had now made his prayers void by speaking. The third person pointed out that the second person had now also spoken by asking the first one why he had spoken. However the fourth person was "very clever". He said: "Thank God that I did not speak!"

The conclusion therefore, is that self-care is important. But how should self-care be implemented? Is it only through prayer and recitation of the Qur'an? Is it only through serving the society and doing community work?

### 3.a. Acquiring Appropriate Beliefs and Faith

The very first thing that needs to be done is to acquire proper beliefs and a proper understanding of the world. For instance, if a person desired to be a good businessman he must first know the market and the people who are in the same business. He needs to know the present situation, future possibilities and the factors at work in that particular business.

Similarly, to be successful in this world, knowing Who has control here is necessary. When getting permission to start a business, one has to know where to get that permission from. In the same way, in order to start a spiritual 'business' one must know where permission has to be attained from. The laws and regulations that apply and should be observed also need to be known along with the types of provisions that are provided and what kind of loans and grants can be obtained.

Sa'di, a famous Iranian poet who wrote *Golestan* and *Bustan*, tells a beautiful story. He says that once a person went to do some business in another country. He realized that in that country the bell which they used to hang in the public bath-houses was very cheap to buy. For example, if the bell would have cost £100 in his country then in that country it cost only £1. So he sold all his goods and with whatever money he had, he purchased maybe a thousand bells. He expected to return to his country and generate £99 profit on each bell. So he transported all these bells back to his home town. However, the problem was that there were only two or three bath-houses in his town and hence, no-one wanted to buy the bells. No-one was interested, even when he offered them at half price. The man therefore lost all his capital and went bankrupt because he did not know the right kind of goods that should be purchased.

Many people are like this and invest in things in this world that will be of no value in the hereafter. People invest their lives, which is the most valuable 'capital' given to them, on things that, when they arrive in the hereafter, they will be told were pointless.

They will then realise that they have wasted their 'capital'. Consequently, it is vital to have faith and to know the way in which the life in this world can secure happiness in the next world. Correct beliefs and a thorough understanding of the connection between the life in this world and the life in the hereafter will be of most benefit. Approximately one third of the Glorious Qur'an talks about the hereafter. There is a reason for this great emphasis: to teach people that the eternal life is the thing for which they must really prepare.

Thus, the human being needs to have correct beliefs. These are not the kind of beliefs that are normally learnt and can only be repeated in parrot-fashion. They must be that kind of beliefs that have been completely absorbed into the very being, so that if the words "there is only One God" are not only spoken by the mouth but the entire body and soul declare monotheism too.

### 3.b. Performing acts of piety and refraining from sins and evil deeds

Maximum effort should be made to perform all obligations and observe all the requirements of faith. Even if a person has proper beliefs and performs all their obligations but does not stop committing sins, he will not succeed. If someone washes his hands ten times a day but continues to touch things that are dirty and polluted, he will become dirty again. It is no use saying that he washed his hands ten times that day. Daily prayer is like a spiritual bath which cleanses the soul, but if the same things are done again after prayer then the soul will become dirty again.

There is a beautiful example to demonstrate this about someone who has a carrier bag into which he puts some purchases in order to take them home. But there is a big hole in the bottom of the carrier bag and whatever he puts into the bag falls out through the hole. He is surprised and wonders how it is possible that he has filled the bag with at least ten times its capacity but it still

remains empty. He wonders where everything is going. In a similar way, depending on age, people have worshipped God for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years. But where is the result of this worship? Why have the people not changed? Why are they the same after the month of Ramadan as they were before it? It is because people do good things, but in addition they do bad things too.

There is another useful example related by Rumi. Once, there lived a farmer who used to harvest his wheat and put it into his storeroom, hoping to fill it up for the winter. To his astonishment though, every time he went to the storeroom to fill it with more wheat he discovered that the level of wheat was lower than before and thus his storeroom was never filled. He was surprised and confused by the situation, especially as the storeroom was always locked so that no-one else had access to it. The farmer always made sure to lock the door carefully. One night he decided to stay awake inside the storeroom in the hope that he would be able to solve the mystery. He remained awake inside the storeroom, silently watching. After midnight several huge rats came into the storeroom took all the wheat! It was only then that the farmer realized the real cause of the problem. Rumi asserts that the human situation is like this. There are rats in the human heart that take away the light of good deeds. If there are no rats, then where is the light of forty years of praying, the light of forty years of fasting, of going for Hajj and so on? Care should therefore be taken to avoid sinful actions. Not even a single sin should be committed. Of course, it is natural for human beings to make mistakes, but a real believer is one who, if he makes a mistake, firstly always feels sad and bitter about it, and secondly quickly repents and sincerely decides not to repeat the same mistake again. If a sin is committed, one should repent as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, amongst the people who are interested in spirituality there are those who think that the religious law (*shari'ah*) is only needed at the beginning and that afterwards the only concern should be the requirements of the spiritual journey

(*tariqah*). They give the analogy of someone who has reached the core and who therefore no longer needs the peel. However, this is an incorrect idea because the shari'ah always needs to be observed. The Holy Prophet and Imams of the household of the Prophet always followed the shari'ah and there is no-one who can claim to be more pious than them. There is no incident where the Holy Prophet committed a sin and then said that it was alright for him to do so. For example, he never prohibited others from telling lies but allowed it for himself. Or prohibited others from drinking alcohol or gambling but made it acceptable for himself. Unfortunately, nowadays there are groups who follow people that refer to themselves as masters or imams without adhering to the requirements of piety, but the groups are led to believe that these 'masters' will never be affected by this.

This matter is very clear according to the school of the Ahlul Bayt. Shari'ah should be observed, but this is not enough. There are two different ways of looking at shari'ah. One is to believe that the shari'ah is only for beginners and that after the higher levels are reached, it is no longer needed. This is what some Sufis do. The second way is to say that the shari'ah is always needed but that by only following shari'ah the higher levels of perfection will not be achieved. If the higher levels are to be attained, in addition to the shari'ah efforts should be made to go beyond the performance of mere rituals and discover the spirit contained within them. An example which might help is that of a person who is at primary school. If someone at primary school feels satisfied with being there, then their education will always remain incomplete. They need to go on to secondary school, to high school and then to university. Moreover, the person cannot say that he will go to secondary school but once he is there he will forget about everything he learnt at primary school. Or that when he goes to university he will forget about everything he learnt at high school. This will obviously not work.

### 3.c. Acquiring good characteristics and removing bad ones

In addition to having proper beliefs, performing obligations and refraining from sins, it is necessary to look into the qualities of the heart or spirit and find which good qualities are lacking so that they can be achieved. Similarly the bad qualities that are present there also have to be found and confronted so that they can be removed. This is what is normally learned in the science of *Akhlaq* (morality) and it is much more difficult than having proper beliefs or proper practice. People often have bad habits that are difficult to change because they have almost become part of them. In this situation it is necessary to struggle and find a cure. For example, a person may be fearful. As soon as it gets dark, they become frightened. Sometimes the person may be very determined to overcome this fear but it is still very difficult and he needs some kind of treatment. Somehow it is like a cancer that needs difficult therapy. Firstly, the bad habits must be identified and then, with determination and promises to oneself, efforts should be made to refrain from doing anything according to that habit because if the more the bad habit is acted on, the stronger it becomes. It may be difficult to remove a habit immediately, but if care is taken not to act according to it then it will weaken. Specific solutions exist for particular bad habits, depending on the kind of habit in question. The general advice and solution therefore, is not to act according to a bad habit but there are also specific solutions for certain bad habits.

In works such as *Mi'raj al-Sa'adah* and *Jami' al-Sa'adah* different faculties of the soul and the corresponding virtues and vices of each are elaborated upon. The methods for obtaining these virtues and removing the vices are also contained therein.

### 3.d. Continuing the process of self-purification until one becomes a true servant who meets his lord

The process detailed above needs to be a continuous one. It is a lifelong challenge that cannot be given a time limit of one month

or one year or ten years, after which time a person can feel that he has completed it and allow himself to relax. On the contrary, as long as a person remains in this world, up to the very last moment of his life, he must be careful. And he must not waste any opportunity. There is no age of retirement because however much one manages to acquire, it is still never enough and more is always needed.

There is an interesting story illustrating the human situation. There was a group of people who were about to be sent into a dark tunnel. They were told that when they entered the corridor it would be very dark and they would not be able to see anything. They were told that they must go from one end of this tunnel to the other end and that on the floor there would be some stones which they could pick up and bring out if they wanted to. They were told that if they took the stones they would regret it, but that they would also regret it if they did not take them! They were then sent into the corridor. Some people thought that it was not worth collecting the stones if they were going to regret doing so. Others thought, out of curiosity, that they might as well take some stones to see what they were, as they were going to regret it either way. Thus, some collected stones whilst others did not. When they were outside again in the daylight, those people who had collected stones realised that they were actually very expensive jewels. Those people who had not taken any stones saw this and became very angry. They started to protest, asking why they had been told that they would regret collecting the stones. They were told that although they were regretting not picking up any stones, those who did pick them up were regretting they had not taken more and wished that they had filled their pockets!

## Practical Instructions

Several general principles have already been discussed, such as observing the shari'ah and taking care of qualities and

characteristics. However there are also certain practices that can strengthen and increase will-power and that can build courage and determination to continue this journey and keep on the right track. In what follows, five instructions given by Muslim mystics have been referred to, all of which are rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

### 1. Not to Speak Unless Necessary

Try not to speak too much. People may think that this is not very important but in fact it is very important indeed. Even if it is not prohibited to talk about something but it is also not useful to mention it, then do not speak about it. Words and what is said have a great effect on the heart because they pre-occupy it. It is like someone who eats too much and then has pain in their stomach because they are not able to digest their food properly. The heart becomes ill from saying things that are unnecessary. This piece of advice should be taken very seriously as it is of utmost importance.

If it is possible to say something in five sentences rather than ten, then it should be said in five. On the occasion where a person realises what he is about to say is not necessary, it is better not to speak. If it is argued that there is a need to sit with parents, family or friends and be sociable then in these circumstances care should be taken of one's actions and words and speaking should be only for the sake of God. It is possible to make an intention that the speech uttered is purely in order to make family or friends happy. 'To bring joy to the heart of a believer' is an act of worship. However, there is a huge difference between someone who says something to make others happy and a person who makes a mockery of others or who just wants to amuse himself by saying too much.

Hence, the words that one speaks should be watched carefully. There is a very interesting hadith from the Holy Prophet in which he told a group of his companions:

لولا تكثير فى كلامكم و تمريج فى قلوبكم لرايتم ما ارى و لسمعتم ما اسمع

> "If it were not because of speaking too much and because of those bad thoughts which come to your heart, you would have been able to see what I see and hear what I hear."[4]

However, the human being either speaks too much or thinks about things that are not useful and then he cannot make any progress.

It can be both easy and difficult not to speak. It can be easy because there is nothing to learn, there is nothing to buy and no special place is needed. Nothing is required so it appears not to be difficult. But once it is attempted, it will quickly become apparent that it is very difficult indeed. Sometimes, not speaking can cause one to feel as if he is going to explode, but it becomes easier with practise. According to some hadiths, silence is a very good form of worship. For example, Imam Ali is quoted as saying:

أَفْضَلُ الْعِبَادَةِ الصَّبْرُ وَ الصَّمْتُ وَ انْتِظَارُ الْفَرَجِ

> "Patience, silence and awaiting *faraj* (delivery; relief) are best types of worship"[5]

لا عباده كالصمت

There is no worship like silence.[6]

الصمت روضه الفكر

Silence is the garden for contemplation.[7]

This is because when one is silent their mind starts to enjoy the beauty of the spiritual world. But if one speaks, their mind becomes busy with the physical world.

**2. Not to eat more than needed**

When a person eats too much, even if the food he eats is halal, it makes his spirit lazy. He will not be able to pay attention to the subtle points properly. In other words the food that is eaten is food for the body, but fasting is food for the soul. However, there is a dilemma here because both the body and the soul need to be fed. They both need food and each of them must be given their due rights. What should be done? Only as much as is needed should be eaten. In this case, food is being given to both the body the soul. Fasting is very important and useful where it is possible, but even if one does not fast, a great deal can be achieved by simply reducing the amount of food eaten, even by a small amount. There is a beautiful poem in Farsi that can be translated as follows:

> "Keep your stomach empty of food and then there will be room for the light of knowledge to come in."

**3. Not to sleep too much.**

This is especially important to avoid time being wasted and to avoid losing the golden opportunity of performing night prayers. Excessive comfort of the body is poisonous for the spirit. Just the right amount of food and rest is needed in order to have a healthy body because the body must be healthy to deliver proper service. However, more sleep than is necessary is harmful for both the body and the spirit. God has created the body in such a way that if it is looked after properly, then the spirit will also be looked

after at the same time. It is not necessary to damage the body in order to become a pious person. If a person eats too much he will damage both his body and his spirit. If he sleeps too much, does not exercise and follows an inactive lifestyle, he will damage his body and his spirit. So it is very important not to sleep too much. In the Glorious Qur'an, God praises believers by saying:

> *"They sleep only a small portion of the night. And before dawn, they ask forgiveness from God."* (51:17 & 18)

There are some people who do not sleep very much but the problem is that they do not know when the correct time to sleep is. They sleep at the time of the day which is best for worship and they are awake during the time which is least beneficial. For example, sometimes people sleep very late, after midnight, at around 2 or 3 am and then, at the best time of the day for worship and contemplation they are unconscious. So the part of the day that is most important is the time before dawn and after dawn until the sun rises.

**4. To have private time in which one can be alone and reflect**

Every human being needs some time to be alone, either during the day or more probably at night. It is a good habit to adopt to sit alone and think at least for ten or fifteen minutes every day, even for example if it is on the prayer mat after prayer or in the garden. But think about what?

It is crucial to think about the things that have been done, about the things that were supposed to be done but were not and about the condition of the soul. A decision should be made about whether or not any progress has been made from the last day. If something has been done right then God should be thanked for that. If something wrong has been done then efforts should be

made to remedy it. If there has been weakness then a penalty should be imposed on oneself.

The only time that such things can be thought about and planned is when a person has some private time alone. If a person is always busy he cannot think about such things. But if fifteen or twenty minutes each day is spent alone then it is possible to achieve all these things. It is hard to know why people are afraid of being alone with themselves but it can often be noticed. People love themselves so much but nevertheless the most painful thing for them is to be left to themselves. If they are put in a room and locked in for 24 hours to be alone, even if food and all the other necessities are provided, they will ask why they are being confined, imprisoned and tortured. But what is wrong with this? They have not been shut in with a wild animal or a criminal. They have only been asked to be completely alone. Why do people not want to be alone? There must be some unhealthy issue behind this. Imam Ali b. Husayn al-Sajjad says:

> "If I am left alone and there is no-one else on the earth and I have the Qur'an with me, I will not feel lonely."

Most people though, are so afraid of being alone that they constantly make themselves busy. And if no-one else is around, they will switch on the television or mp3 player or radio to make some noise so that they do not feel alone. But this is very bad. Sometimes one must try to be alone, to have some privacy, to have some rest and relaxation and think about the things that are very important.

**5. Constant remembrance of God.**

Again this is both difficult and not difficult to do. It is not difficult because it does not cost anything. It does not need payment, a special place or physical exertion. So it should be

very easy, as in theory, are all the other practices mentioned above, none of which costs anything and so they are very cost effective methods when we consider the results which they can produce. However, it is also very difficult to do because the soul always tries to indulge itself, to do what it wants and does not want to be disciplined. But if the soul can be disciplined then things become easy.

Remembrance of God is healing. The names of God are medicine and if the medicine is taken in order to remember God then it is possible to be healed. If, on the other hand, invocations like '*Allah-u Akbar*' are repeated again and again but their meanings do not reach the hearts then the mouth is busy but God is not remembered properly. However, if the names of God are used to remember Him then this will lead to healing. It is very easy to do this. It can be done while driving, walking or doing whatever needs to be done. The Qur'an speaks of the people who do not forget God even when they are involved in business and commerce. They always remember God. No matter if a person is cooking or washing, teaching or studying, it is possible and necessary for him to remember God at the same time. All the different dhikrs (like *Allāh-u Akbar*, *Alḥamdulillāh* and *Subḥānallāh*) are medicines, but they must be taken correctly by remembering God through them, by trying to get close to that attribute of God that is being mentioning and it is only then that closeness to God will be achieved.

So this is the way in which God should be remembered and if a person manages to taste the sweetness and beauty of the true remembrance of God then he will never be pleased with anything else. It is necessary to purge the self of all the bad things on the inside and only then will a person fully enjoy the remembrance of God.

If the habit of spending private time alone is developed then it can be utilized to start learning how God can be remembered during that private time and from there it can then be expanded to

the rest of a person's life. In the beginning a person may only remember God when he is on the prayer mat, but gradually he can try to remember Him throughout the day. And then the remembrance of God will become constant.

So these are five important things that need to be observed:

1. Not to speak too much.
2. Not to eat too much.
3. Not to sleep too much.
4. Not to mix with people too much or be too busy. To have some privacy.
5. Not to forget God.

These five things are very easy to implement and do not cost anything. They are five powerful vitamins for spiritual health and growth. If someone maintains them for several weeks he will certainly start feeling the difference and will see the results.

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[1] See also the verse (62:2).

[2] There is an addition to the above hadith, which can be found in *Bihar al-Anwar* and reads as follows: 'The best struggle is to fight one's own self.'

[3] *Al-Kafi*, Vol. 5, p. 12, no 3 and *Al-Amali* by al-Saduq, Session 71, p. 377, no 8. For an elaborate account of the subject, see *Combat with the Self* by Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Hurr al-'Amili, translated by Nazmina Virjee (London: ICAS, 2003).

[4] Cited from Sunni sources in *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. 5, p. 315.

[5] *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 68, p. 97.

[6] *Ghural al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim,* Hadith no. 10471.

[7] *Ibid.* Hadith no. 546.

# Invocation of God: The Only Way to Human Salvation and Prosperity

**Muhsin Araki**

This paper addresses the issue of invocation or remembrance of God as the key concept in Islamic spirituality. The article argues that it is through the invocation of God that human beings follow the path that takes them from darkness to Light and accomplish peace, happiness, honesty and righteousness. The essence of all the teachings communicated to mankind through the prophets is the invocation of God. The invocation of God shapes one's insight, values, worthiness, character and life-style. The paper ends by elaborating on the degrees and stages of the invocation of God.

According to the Glorious Qur'an, man has a particular status in the cosmic order and that is to act as the vicegerent of God. This special status in the whole universe lends man superiority over other creatures, including angels. This is not merely a kind of formal superiority over all things other than God; rather it means management, governing and the ability to take actions and to determine one's destiny. In Islam this ability is referred to as *wilāyah* (guardianship).

Man's particular status and authority can lead to his happiness, prosperity and delightful life on the one hand, and to the flourishment and progress of the whole world on the other, if he acts in conformity with the inner order of the universe governed and dominated by God and His will. In this case, his actions will be in line with the overall orientation of the order of creation and

the esoteric orientation of things, bringing peace, joy and prosperity to the human community and to the world in which man lives. This enables man to attain spiritual development and perfection, and eventually leads to the fulfilment or flourishment of his inner potentialities. The Glorious Qur'an describes the situation in the following verse:

> *"And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (themselves against evil) we would have opened up for them blessings from the heavens and the earth but they rejected, so we seized them for what they did earn."* (7:96)

If man deviates from the path of obedience, submission and servitude of God, instead taking the way of disobedience of God, rebelling against Him, not performing the duties incumbent upon him and not acting in accordance with the divine commandments that constitute a justice-based order of creation, the result will be nothing but serious and long-lasting conflict. This divergence will be between man's illegitimate and unfair desires on the one hand and the reality of the justice-based order of creation which governs all things as well as the reality of man's needs and the orientations determined by God on the other. As a result, the conflict not only causes man and the world around him to lose the course of development and flourishing, but also brings terrible harm and calamities which in turn lead to misery, great loss, helplessness, wickedness, and backwardness for man and for his surrounding world. Such a tragic situation is the effect of man's rebellious illegitimate desires and aspirations.

Servitude of God, which is taken to mean acting in conformity with the justice-based created (cosmic) order governing all things, originates from the invocation of God, for it is the constant invocation of God that paves the way for man's obedience and submission to Him and his servitude. On the other hand, it is the forgetfulness of God that obstructs the way to His obedience and servitude. This is why God's teachings and

guidance that have been sent down through the prophets to mankind are referred to as a 'Reminder' (*dhikr*), and turning away from the divine teachings is referred to as 'negligence' (*ghaflah*).

Concerning the Torah, the set of teachings revealed to Moses and Aaron, the Glorious Qur'an says:

> *"And indeed We did grant unto Moses and Aaron the (book) of Criterion (between the right and wrong), and Light and a Reminder for the pious."* (21:48)

The Qur'an also introduces the Gospel and its teachings, revealed to Jesus as a means of remembrance of God and criticizes those who have forgotten its teachings and do not act according to them:

> *"And of those (also) who say 'Verily, We are Nazerenes', We did take their covenant, but they have forgotten a portion of what they were admonished with, therefore we stirred up among them enmity and hatred (to last) till the day of resurrection; and soon will God inform them of what they have been doing."* (5:14)

Furthermore, the Glorious Qur'an introduces itself as a Reminder (*dhikr*):

> *"Verily We have sent down the Reminder (the Qur'an), and verily We unto it will certainly be the guardian."* (15:9)[1]

Elsewhere the very Qur'an, which is defined as a Reminder is introduced as a means of Guidance to the right path, the path of peace, and the path which takes one from darkness to the Light:

> *"Indeed hath come unto you from God, Light and a Manifest Book (Qur'an). Whereby God guides*

*him who follows His pleasures, into the ways of peace and takes them out from darkness towards the Light by His will and guides them to the path (that is) straight."* (5:16)

To sum up, according to the Qur'anic point of view:

a) The teachings of prophets direct mankind to peace.

b) It is through the invocation of God that human beings overtake the path which takes them from darkness to Light and accomplish peace, happiness, honesty and righteousness.

c) The essence of all the teachings communicated to mankind through the prophets is the invocation of God.

This paper will only give a brief account and will not go through the philosophical and scientific arguments for the facts mentioned above by philosophical exploration or through the results obtained from scientific observations. However, the fact that invocation of God nurtures some characters or qualities in man that bring about peace, tranquillity, happiness and joy in this life and in the divine eternal paradise and the infinite joyful pleasures of God in the other world, will be pointed out.

At a glance, invocation of God develops insight, worthiness, character and lifestyle in mankind, meaning that his relationship with others grows and is conjoined with love, self-sacrifice, benevolence, forgiveness, kindness and selflessness. Thus, enmity will be replaced by love and friendship, selfishness by compassion and self-sacrifice, violence by benevolence, and wrath and retaliation by forgiveness and mercy. Each of the qualities developed will be considered in more detail below:

1. Concerning the worldview, it can be said that one who performs the practice of invocation thinks that life is infinite and this world is only the first stage: a period in which man prepares himself for the eternal life in the hereafter. In this world man is

capable of achieving utmost happiness and fulfilling his desires and needs when he depends on the absolute power. God, the Omnipotent, has control over the whole universe, and He created mankind to achieve happiness, prosperity, and paved the way for him so that all of existence is destined to be at his disposal so that man can gain access to his desires and aspirations and finally so he can attain utmost felicity and all-embracing prosperity:

> *"God is the One Who created Heaven and Earth and sends down water from the sky. He brings forth produce by means of it as sustenance for you. He has subjected ships to you so they may sail at sea by His command; and subjected rivers to you. He regulates the sun and moon for you, both journeying on and on, and regulates night and day for you. He gives you everything you ever ask Him for. If you counted God's favour(s), you would never [be able to] number them; yet man is so unfair, ungrateful."* (14:32-34)

This fact is also mentioned in other verses of the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"God is He Who made subservient unto you the sea that you may eat from it fresh meat, and obtain from it ornaments, which you wear —and you see the ships plowing through it— and that you may seek of His grace, and that you may give thanks.* (16:14)

> *"And made subservient unto you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever in the earth, all, on His behalf: Verily in this are signs for people who reflect."* (45:12 & 13)

2. Concerning values, it can be said that according to this mode of thought, all human beings are equal before God and no human being has any superiority or preference over another except in piety and obedience of God. Thus, those who have taken precedence in piety and obedience to God are more

honoured than others. In other words, the person who is nearer to God and who has precedence over the others in justice and virtue and who guards (himself) against evil is the one who is more honoured in the eyes of God.

If piety and virtue are to be taken as the criteria for social eminence, people will surely compete to gain supreme values, and will not act according to their own personal or group interests. If individuals in a society compete with one another to attain more piety and supreme virtue, love, humility, compassion, self sacrifice and other similar values, then these values will prevail in that society and people will work hard to attain supreme values instead of pursuing inferior interests that bring about nothing but opposition and disputes. Evidently, those who have precedence over others in humility, compassion and self-sacrifice and try to serve others will always be happy and delighted.

3. Human character: The individual and social aspects of human entity are denoted by the term 'human character'. According to this concept, 'servitude of God' represents the real nature of human beings. Servitude of God implies the negation or refutation of the domination of any power other than God's power over human personality on the one hand, and utter obedience to God the Almighty, who is All-Just and All-Powerful, on the other.

Anyone who has this quality of servitude to God seeks nothing but God's pleasure and stands against the temptation of any transient pleasures, ephemeral pursuits, material interests, lower desires and aspirations that drive man to be in opposition with justice, piety and virtue.

It is quite evident that all oppression, discrimination, inequality, disastrous wars, bloody massacres, transgression, gross violations of human rights, robberies and all sorts of major or minor crimes originate from the selfishness and arrogance of those people who seek only to satisfy their own ephemeral material interests,

pleasures and lower desires. The Glorious Qur'an introduces those who forget to invoke God and turn away from the Qur'an and other divine Reminders as those who have lost their genuine nature and their real self, which is indeed the only capital or resource in the battlefield of this worldly life:

> *"... Indeed they have lost their souls, and what they forged has gone away from them."* (7:53)

4. Life-style: When one's personality is formed on the basis of the divine worldview, values and character mentioned above, one's lifestyle, whether in connection with himself or with others, will originate from virtue and piety and will be based on justice and righteousness.

In a sermon addressed to someone known as Hammam, Imam Ali (A.S) gives a general but comprehensive picture of the pious people who live on the invocation of God and describes their characteristics on the basis of their worldview, values, character and life-style:

> "The pious in this world are the people of distinction. Their speech is to the point, their dress is moderate and their gait is humble. They submit to Allah with obedience. They keep their eyes close before what Allah has made unlawful for them, and they put their ears to knowledge. They remain in the time of trials as though they remain in comfort due to their satisfaction with the act of Allah. If there had not been fixed periods of life ordained for each, their spirits would not have remained in their bodies even for the twinkling of an eye because of the eagerness for the reward and the fear of chastisement. The greatness of the Creator is seated in their heart, and so, everything else appears small in their eyes. Thus, to them, Paradise is as though they see it and are enjoying

its favours. To them, Hell is also as if they see it and are suffering punishment in it.

...The peculiarity of anyone of them is that you will see that he has strength in religion, determination along with leniency, faith with conviction, eagerness in seeking knowledge, courtesy in lenience, clemency in alms-giving, understanding in awareness, knowledge in forbearance, moderation in riches, devotion in worship, gracefulness in starvation, endurance in hardship, mercy for the exhausted, fulfilment of the right, leniency in earning, desire for the lawful, pleasure in guidance, hatred from greed, piety in straightforwardness, and abstinence in appetite. The approval of him who ignores him does not deceive him. He does not stop judging his deeds. He performs virtuous deeds but still feels afraid. In the evening he is anxious to offer thanks to Allah. In the morning his anxiety is to remember Allah. He passes the night in fear and rises in the morning in joy- fear lest night is passed is passed in forgetfulness and joy over the favour and mercy received by him. If his self refuses to endure a thing, which it does not like, he does not grant its request towards what it likes. The coolness of his eye lies in what is to last forever, while from the things of this world that will not last he keeps aloof. He transfuses knowledge with forbearance, and speech with action.

You will see his laziness aloof, his activity uninterrupted, his hopes simple, his shortcomings few, his heart fearing, his spirit contented, his ignorance absent, his affairs simple, his religion safe, his desires dead, his anger suppressed, his mannerism pure. He does not mention what is kept

secret with him. He does not conceal the testimony against his enemies. He does not do any practice ostentatiously. He does not leave anything shyly. Good alone is expected from him. Evil from him is not to be feared. Even if he is found among those who forget Allah he is counted among those who remember him. He forgives him who is unjust to him, and he gives to him who deprives him. He behaves well with him who behaves ill with him.

His forbearance is not absent; he does not neglect what adorns him. Indecent speech is far from him, his utterance is lenient. His evils are non-existent. His virtues are ever present, his good is ahead, and mischief has turned its face from him. He is dignified during calamities, patient in distress, and thankful during ease. He does not commit excess over him whom he hates, and does not commit sin for the sake of him whom who loves. He does not claim the possession of things that are not his. He does not deny others' rights that are obligatory upon him. He admits truth before evidence is brought against him. He does not misappropriate what is placed in custody. He does not call others bad names. He does not oppress or threaten others. He does not cause harm to his neighbour, he does not feel happy at others misfortunes. He hurries to the right. He fulfils the trusts. He is slow in ill deeds. He enjoins good and forbids evil. He does not enter into the wrong and does not go out of right.

If he is silent his silence does not grieve him. If he laughs he does not raise his voice. He is satisfied with what is his. Malice does not agitate him. Whims do not overcome him. Stinginess does not prevail upon him. He does not desire what is not

his. He associates with people so as to learn. He keeps silent so as to be safe. He asks so as to understand. He does not listen to the good word so that others will not find themselves neglectful in comparison with him. He does not speak of his good actions so as to avoid talking pride in it before others.

If he is wronged he endures till Allah takes revenge of his behalf. His own self is in distress because of him while the people are at ease from him. He puts himself in hardship for the sake of his next life and makes people feel safe from himself. His keeping away from others is by way of asceticism and purification, and his nearness to those to whom he is near is by way of leniency and mercifulness. His keeping away is not by way of vanity or a feeling of greatness, nor is his nearness by way of deceit or cheating. He follows the examples of the past men of virtue and he is the example of the coming people of virtue." (*Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 191)

The society in which such people are brought up and which models itself on the characters and lifestyles of such pious people will never suffer from dangerous social calamities, moral deviations and bloody struggles over private or group or class interests.

**Definition of the Invocation of God**

The Invocation of God can be defined briefly as 'man's awareness of God's Lordship and his servitude towards Him.' Man's servitude towards God is a reality to which he submits, whether he likes it or not. It is a reality in which he believes, even though he may make a great show of reluctance in his words and actions.

The Glorious Qur'an puts emphasis on the fact that all human beings, including the most stubborn disbelievers acknowledge God's divinity and express their inner submission and servitude towards God even if they rise up in open rebellion and show their opposition in words and actions. This acknowledgement of God's divinity is clearly expressed by the Glorious Qur'an in the following verse:

> *"And if you ask them who created them, they would certainly say: 'God'. Whence are they then deluded away (from the truth)?"* (43:87)

The Glorious Qur'an refers to Pharaoh and his followers:

> *"So when came to them Our clear signs, said they: 'this is plain sorcery.' They denied them in iniquity and arrogance while their hearts were convinced; See then how was the end of the mischief makers"* (27:13 & 14)

Acknowledgement of God's divinity is also expressed in the following verses:

> *"And if you ask them: 'Who created the heavens and the earth and made subservient the sun and the moon?' Certainly will they say: 'God!' Whence are they then turned away? God (it is Who) makes abundant the sustenance for whomsoever he wills of His servants, and (similarly) He causes it to be straitened for him (whomsoever he wills); Verily God is Well-Cognizant of all things. And nothing is this life of the world but a vain sport and play; and verily the abode of the hereafter, is certainly the life: if they but know. And when embark they on ships, call they upon God sincerely vowing (only) unto Him, and when He brings them safe to land, behold! They associate (others with Him). (Then) let them*

*thank not for what We have given them, and let them enjoy; but soon shall they know".* (29:61-66)

The last two verses mention the fact that the disbelievers, when they are placed in a condition in which they are threatened from all directions and cut off from any means of saving themselves from danger, begin to reveal their inner or hidden acknowledgement (of God) and turn to Him obediently and submissively to seek His help. However, as soon as they feel that God has satisfied their needs and that they are no longer in danger, they revolt against God, take other creatures as their deities, and make a great show of obedience to a tyrant ruler or the rebels who have illegally captured the seat of power. It is worth mentioning that Man's awareness of his true position and his inner acknowledgements of God's divinity constitute the essence or reality of the invocation of God.

The practice of *dhikr* or invocation has various levels or stages which, if one passes through them successfully and reaches higher stages of invocation, will cause him or her to attain an extremely high degree of spirituality. At this stage, the person's desires will be compatible with God's desires and he will turn away from all that God turns away from and will eventually come to love what God loves and hate what God hates. In other words, one's love, hatred and desire will become God's love, hatred and desire. This is actually the stage, or rather, the station (*maqām*) which only the divine Prophets and a few chosen spiritual masters are honoured with.

**Stages and Degrees of Invocation in Brief**

The practice of invocation or *dhikr* involves various stages or degrees (*maratib*), each of which has certain effects and distinguished features. A few of them will be touched on below:

### *First Stage*

The first stage of "Invocation of God" is invocation with the tongue or with words. If the invocation with the tongue (*dhikr-e lisāni* or *lafdhi*) is carried out in accordance with its rites and rules (*ādāb*), it can elevate man to higher stages or degrees such as invocation with action (*dhikr-e 'amali*) and above even that, to invocation with the heart or the spirit (*dhikr-e qalbi*) or to what is termed by some as spiritual invocation (*dhikr-e ma'nawi*).

The most important rites and rules of invocation with the tongue are as follows:

**1.1. Turning toward God**, the Almighty, and turning (one's mind) away from everything other than God.

**1.2. Purity** is the essential condition for invocation. In other words, invocation of God will be fruitless if it is not accompanied by pure intention. By purity we mean that the invoker (*dhākir*) seeks nothing but God's pleasure and performs invocation just for God's pleasure. Purity is of various degrees. In higher stages of purity man reaches the stations through the act of invocation not for the sake of his own wishes. In fact, in this stage he becomes aware of his nothingness and enters the battle against his own self so that he sees no reality for himself for which he seeks pleasure through the practice of invocation. His 'self' is annihilated in God's pleasure. He sees nothing other than God and thinks of nothing but the pleasures of God and nothing remains within him save God's pleasure.

**1.3. Entreat** (*taḍarru'*) and **broken-heartedness**: The invocation of God should be associated with humility. God, the Almighty, addresses the Holy Prophet in the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"And remember thy Lord within thyself in humility and awe, and not in a loud voice, in the morning and evening; and be thou not of the negligent ones."*(7:205)

Entreat implies broken-heartedness along with the feeling of anxiety and helplessness. The one who suffers from this situation is the one who feels himself in great need of God and feels his need as urgent and all-embracing. He acknowledges that nobody but God can save him from his miserable situation. He feels like a man surrounded by roaring flames of fire without anybody to help and grant refuge to him but God. Addressing those who have fallen into and are threatened by serious dangers in wild deserts and seas and cannot find any saviour except God, the Qur'an says:

> *Say thou: "Who delivered you from the (dread of the) darkness of the land and the sea, (when) ye pray to Him (openly) humiliating yourselves, and secretly (saying), 'If He delivereth us from this, certainly we shall be of the grateful ones.'" Say Thou: "God delivereth you from them, and from every distress, yet again ye associate (others) with Him."* (6:63 & 64)

In the Glorious Qur'an and the traditions (*hadiths*) related from the Infallibles (Shi'ite Imams), entreat is termed as the spirit or essence of supplication and the remembrance of God and it is entreat that brings the invocation of God and supplication to him to fruition. The tree of supplication and invocation of God bears fruit when it is watered by entreat or self-debasement. It is narrated from Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam of the Shi'ites, that God said to Moses:

> "O' the son of 'Imran! Give me from your heart humility, and from your body submission, and from your eyes flowing tears. Call me in the darkness at night and then you will find me close to you and answering." (*Wasā'il al-Shi'ah*, Abwāb al-Du'ā, Bāb-e 30, Hadith 2)

And it is related in another *hadith* that:

> "Verily Allah revealed to Jesus: Call Me like the distressed flood-stricken person who has been carried away by water and there is nobody to save him! O' Jesus! Call no one other than Me till your prayer becomes worthy of being responded by me." (*Wasā'il al-Shi'ah*, Abwāb al-Du'ā, Bāb-e 65, Hadith 2)

God, the Almighty, has repeatedly emphasized the attribute of entreating and self-debasement in the practice of invocation and supplication:

> *"Call your Lord, humbly and secretly; Verily God does not love the transgressors."* (7:55)

In many places the Glorious Qur'an insists on the point that most of the hardships and sufferings with which God has tried and tested mankind are intended to make man feel utter submission and humility before God, and then to reach the state of invocation and humble supplication and prayer. This verifies the fact that man's entreat or self- debasement and humility before God are the means by which he can get rid of all sufferings, hardships and miseries that have befallen him and that it is through entreat and self-debasement before the Divine that man's prayer and supplication develop worthiness of being responded to by God the Almighty, and that salvation is reached. This fact is referred to in many verses, for instance:

> *"We sent [word] to nations before you and seized them suffering and hardship so that they might act submissively. Why then did they not act submissively when our violence came to them, but instead their hearts were hardened and Satan made whatever they were doing seem attractive to them. So when they forgot what they had been reminded of, We opened up the doors to everything for them until just when they were happiest with what they have been given, We*

*caught them suddenly and there they were confounded. The last remnant of the folk who had been doing wrong was cut off. Praise to God, Lord of the Universe!"* (6:42-45)

**1.4. Fear and awe:** In various verses invocation of God is referred to in relation to fear and awe as in the following verse:

*"Remember thy Lord in thy soul, humbly and fearfully..."* (7:205)

Fear of God the Almighty, takes three forms:

**1.4.1.** Debasing Fear (*khawf-e rahbah*). This refers to the kind of fear that makes one feel debased and humble before God. A person who has this type of fear thinks he is of failing to perform God's right incumbent upon mankind and this right is represented in a person's acts of submission and servitude. This is a real and genuine conviction and not an illusion. As a matter of fact, man falls short of expressing his genuine obedience to God.

**1.4.2.** Fear of the Divine, All-Knowing, All-Just Sovereignty (*khawf az hukumat*-e *'ālemeh wa 'ādeleh-ye ilāhi* ). God, the Almighty, is the only and absolute ruler of the universe who is just and His justice is infinite. In addition to being Just, God is Omniscient and nothing, seen or unseen, can fall outside of His knowledge. Therefore, any grave sins or violations committed by human beings, whether deliberately or accidentally, whether within the heart or with the limbs, whether in public or in private, are not hidden from divine sight.

Naturally, the feeling of a man who is always subject to errors and sins will logically be nothing but the feeling of fear and awe before a ruler like God Who is at once Omnipotent and Just.

**1.4.3.** Fear of the self (*khawf az nafs*). Anyone who becomes cognizant of his nothingness, deficiencies, unworthiness, guilt and misdeeds, finds himself shameful before God and His divine

just scale. Those who reassess their own selves will become aware of their own rebellions, grave sins and disobediences before God the Almighty. In this case, man naturally feels fearful of his sins and misdeeds.

Thus, fear and awe before God is the most logical state a theist may experience. On the one hand, God has the great right on man to show utter submission and obedience towards His just wills and commandments. On the other hand, God is Omnipotent and Omniscient, aware of every aspect and detail of human existence and has an all-embracing power. Man is always subject to grave sins before God.

**1.5. Abundant invocation:** One of the important rules and vows of invocation is the abundance and continuity of invocation. According to the Glorious Qur'an, the abundance of invocation is an indication of being a true believer, while the hypocrites are known for their lack of frequent invocation of God. The Glorious Qur'an says:

> *"Indeed, (there is) for you in the Apostle of God (Muhammad) an excellent pattern (of conduct) for him he hopes in God and the latter day (hereafter) and remembers God much"* (33:21)

Elsewhere in describing the hypocrites, the Glorious Qur'an says:

> *"Verily the hypocrites strive to deceive God while He is deceiving them; And when they stand up for prayers, they stand up sluggishly (without earnestness), they do it only to be seen of men, and they remember not God save a little."* (4:142)

Establishing the ritual prayers in conformity with its particular conditions is considered to be the first stage of the invocation of God, together with the supererogatory prayers (*nawāfil*) and some other rituals and optional supplications, which naturally add to the effects and qualities springing from them.

### *Second Stage*

The second stage of invocation of God is said to be invocation with actions (*dhikr-e 'amali*). At this stage, the invoker (*dhākir*) goes beyond the invocation of God with the tongue and keeps invoking God in his conduct. Invocation with the actions is meant to be in constant invocation of God in actions and conducts which can be realized through submission and obedience manifested in human actions.

Hypocrites are characterized in the Glorious Qur'an as those who enjoin evil and forbid performing good and as those who have forsaken God, so God has forsaken them.

> *"The hypocrite men and the hypocrite women are one from another, they enjoin evil and forbid good and withhold their hands (from spending in the way of God); they have forsaken God, so He has forsaken them; verily the hypocrites, they are the transgressors."* (9:67)

By contrast, believers are characterized as those who enjoin good and forbid evil and obey God and His Apostle (Muhammad):

> *"And the believer men and the believer women, they are guardians to one another; they enjoin good and forbid evil and they establish (the regular) prayers and pay the poor-rate and obey God and His Apostle (Muhammad). These, God will bestow on them His Mercy; verily God is All-Mighty, All-wise."* (9:71)

The Glorious Qur'an frequently refers to the obedience of God not only as the most important attribute of believers but also as the criterion for making a distinction between the believers and the hypocrites:

> *"The Prophet believes in what has come down unto him from his Lord and (so do) the believers; all believe in God and in His Angels and His Book and His apostles; (they say) 'What makes no difference between His apostles;' and they say 'We have heard and obeyed (and we implore) your forgiveness, O' Our Lord! And unto you is our march.'"* (2:285)

Elsewhere the Glorious Qur'an addresses the believers as follows:

> *"And remember you the bounties of God on you, and His covenant He has bound you with, when you said 'We have heard (your commandments) and we have obeyed (it sincerely).'"* (5:7)

Invocation with accompanying action is referred to in Qur'anic terminology as *true Islam*, and a *true Muslim* is therefore introduced as someone who sincerely obeys the divine commandments and submits to God in all conditions. Islam itself is of various degrees and the great prophets of God throughout history are the divine leading figures who are the first people to believe in Islam. The Holy Prophet is addressed as below in the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"Say, 'Verily my prayer and my sacrifice, my life and my death, (are all, only) for God, the Lord of the worlds.'"* (6:162)

Hafiz, the well-known Iranian poet and mystic offers some lines in his poetry describing invocation with action as well as describing the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him and his household), as the excellent exemplar and manifestation of this sort of invocation:

بجز آن نرگس مستانه که حشیش مرساد

زیر این طارم فیروزه کسي خوش ننشست

جان فداي دهنش باد كه در باغ نظـر

چمن آراي جهان خوش تر از اين غنچه نيست

"Save that intoxicated flower – the (evil) eye reach him not!

None state happy beneath this turquoise value (of heaven).

May my soul be the ransom of his mouth! For in the garden of vision,

The Parterre-arrayer (the Creator) of the world established no rose-bud sweeter than this rose-bud (of a mouth)."

In these two lines, Hafiz, inspired by the holy verse mentioned above, describes the Prophet as a flower who has attained the station of perfection in loving God and mentions the fact that no human being under the azure sky has ever reached this stage of perfection in the way that he has, the stage to which the Glorious Qur'an refers to as 'the first Muslim'.

In the following lines, Hafiz has made an excellent mention of this station:

به حسن خلق ووفا كس به يار ما نرسد

تورا در اين سخن انكار كار ما نرســـــد

اگر چه حسن فروشان بجلوه آمده انـد

كسي به حسن وملاحت به يار ما نرســـــد

بحق صحبت ديرين كه هيچ محرم راز

به یار یك جهت حق گزار مانرســـــــد

"To our friend in beauty of disposition and of fidelity, one -reacheth not,

In this matter, to thee, denial of our work – reacheth not.

Although, into splendour, have come beauty-boaster,

To our beloved in beauty and grace, one reacheth not

By the right of old friendship (I swear) that any mystery confident,

To our friend, of one way (sincere), thank-offering, - reacheth not."

Having referred to the Holy Prophet, Hafiz describes him as *"haqguzār"* meaning someone who has performed his duties and has expressed his utter submission to the Divine and His commandments. Even his sincerity in submission to and obedience of God is described in these lines as one-way or single-oriented love.

The higher degrees or stages of 'Islam' cannot be achieved except through the spiritual journey and the practice of invocation of God. Obedience to God in actions is claimed to be the first stage (true Islam or *Islām-e haqiqi*) which can be achieved through passing the stages of 'invocation with action' and then 'invocation with the heart', paving the way for man to traverse all the distances between the servant and God and to reach the station in which he sees and wishes for nothing but God.

Achieving higher degrees or stages of invocation with action and invocation with the heart is not possible without unconditioned or

utter obedience to the Holy Prophet and his divine teachings. As soon as one can attain this degree, he is apt to be placed in the station of 'the proximity of the Holy Prophet' (*jiwār-e Rasool-e akram*) which is identical to that of the 'proximity of God' (*jiwār-e khudāy-e muta'al*). Those who can attain such a supreme station will be engulfed in the pleasure of (the station of) 'union with God' (*wasl-e ilāhi*) and, while enjoying the noblest degrees of vision of God (*visio Dei*) or the vision of 'the Face of God' (*ru'yat wa nadhar be wajhillāh*), which is not to be taken as a physical or bodily vision, can be endowed with the delights and pleasures of the universe as well. These delights and pleasures are beyond the imagination and understanding of those who are imprisoned and captives of the fetters of this material world.

### *Third Stage*

The third stage among the various stages of invocation of God is that of 'invocation with the heart' or 'spiritual invocation'. Turning towards God with the heart is the necessary condition of all forms of invocation. What is meant here though is different. It refers to a particular transformation that occurs in man's heart, turning the heart's state into, 'radiance' (*derakhshandegi*) or 'purity' (*ṣafā*) or 'illumiation' (*noorāniyyat*). This is what the great Muslim mystics call "world-reflecting". The awakened heart (*qalb-e bidār*) is also referred to in mystical terminology as "the reflecting cup" (*jām-e jahān namā*).

Hafiz says:

سالها دل طلب جام جم از ما مي كرد

آنچه خود داشت زبيگانه تمنّا مي كرد

"Search for the cup of Jamshid (Divine knowledge) from me, years my heart made.

And for what it possessed, from a stranger,
entreaty [my heart] made."

Invocation with the heart includes various stages. Three of these general stages are mentioned below:

**3.1.** *Dhikr-e hāli* (invocation by state) At this stage, rust is removed from the mirror of the heart, the mysterious burden which, as a result of forgetfulness, hinders the heart to ascend higher, disappears. Man feels as light as a feather, foresees future events, removes all the obstacles and veils that obscure the realities in the universe, comprehends the transience of the world and the attachment to God of all things, witnesses God's domination of the world and all the things in it, becomes aware of his nothingness and unworthiness before the glory and majesty of God and realizes his infidelity, deficiency and sins of omissions against the infinite love, mercy and grace of God. At this point, his heart breaks and the dried fountain of tears bursts out again from his little eyes and signs of penitence, regret and repentance appears on his face. Invocation by state has a variety of forms, some of which are referred to below:

**3.1.1.** Invocation of wakefulness (*dhikr-e bidāri*): This sort of invocation is experienced by those who have fallen into the darkness of forgetfulness and whose hearts have, all of a sudden, been illuminated by a flash of invocation, bursting into roaring flames that captures all their existence and leads them to higher stages of invocation with the heart. The story related by the Glorious Qur'an in this regard is that of the magicians who were at the service of Pharaoh and who became awakened to the divine miracles accomplished by Moses, making them turn their thoughts towards God.

**3.1.2.** Invocation by refraining (*dhikr-e bāzdāri*): This form of invocation is often experienced by those who, despite being pious, are subject to certain illegal desires and tendencies. Before committing sins though, the invocation of God comes upon them

and they thus refrain from evil deeds. This kind of invocation is indicated in the following verse in the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"Verily those who guard (themselves against evil) when an evil thought from the Satan afflicts them, they become mindful (of God and get awakened) then Lo! They see."* (7:201)

**3.1.3.** Invocation by return (*dhikr-e bāz'āyi*): this sort of invocation is experienced by those who have been afflicted by sins, but on being afflicted, they suddenly become awake and aware of the sins committed. Thereafter, they turn to God and express their regret and repentance. This situation is also clearly expressed by the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"...and those, who when they do a shameful deed or commit wrong to their (own) selves, remember God and implore for pardon for their sins; and who forgives sins except God? And who persists not (intentionally), in what they have done (amiss) while they know it."* (3:135)

**3.1.4.** Invocation by vision (*dhikr-e didāri*): The invoker in this form of dhikr-e hali achieves the vision of God in his heart and experiences a state of spiritual delight (ecstasy) which causes all the veils that hinder the heart from 'seeing' God to be removed and the invoker no longer has any obstacles between himself and his God.

The most important veil that blocks the way for man to come be able to 'see' God is the veil of his own self (*hijāb-e khudi* or *hijāb-e nafs)*. Fakhr al-Din Iraqi, the great mystical Persian poet, and an intimate friend of Jalāl al-Din Rumi, makes reference to the veil of the self saying:

در میان من ومحبوب همین است حجاب

وقت آن است که این پرده به یکسوفکنم

"Between me and the Beloved is this very veil.

This is the time to remove this veil."

In the state of invocation by vision, the veil of the self is lifted up and man, becoming overwhelmed and illuminated by the light which has captured all his existence, is drowned in the vision of God. This rarely happens to the wayfarer (*sālik*). Those who have been endowed with God's grace will experience such states more often and for those who have achieved high degrees of spirituality, this becomes enduring for them. Such people may experience the vision of God most of the time or even permanently. A reference is made to this state in the Glorious Qur'an:

> *"Verily the righteous ones shall be in bounteous bliss, On exalted couches will they view. Thou (O' Our Apostle Muhammad) will recognize in their faces, the (delightful) radiance of the bliss."* (83:22-24)

This quality can be achieved in this world by those who have arrived at high stages of the knowledge of God. It is narrated from Imam Ali (may peace be upon him) that "If the veils are removed my certainty will not increase."

Imam Ali has also been quoted saying:

> "I was not to worship a lord whom I have not seen."

**3.2.** Invocation by quality (*dhikr-e waṣfi*): The stage higher and above that of invocation by state is the one which is called invocation by quality. It is said that for the one who achieves this stage, the invocation of God becomes mixed with his nature and is never neglected by him. Such a person is constantly in the state of awareness of God and sees all things in God and whatever he sees carries a sign of divine manifestation.

Referring to those who have attained this station (of invocating God), the Glorious Qur'an says:

> *"Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alteration of the night and the day, there are signs for men who possess wisdom. Those who remember God standing, and sitting and reclining on their sides and think (seriously) in the creation of the heaven and the earth; saying "O' Our Lord! Thou hast not created (all) this in vain! Glory to Thee! Save us from the torment of the (hell) fire. O' Our Lord! Whomsoever Thou causeth to enter the (Hell) fire, surely Thou hast put him to disgrace; there is not, for the unjust, any of the helpers. O' Our Lord! We have indeed heard the voice of a Crier (Apostle), calling (us) unto faith, saying "Believe ye in your Lord!" and we did we believe. O' Our Lord! Therefore Forgive us then our sins and remove away from us our evil deeds, and cause us to die with the virtuous ones.""* (3:190-193)

Baba Tahir of Hamadan, the celebrated Iranian mystic and poet, refers to the same mystical station:

به دریا بنگرم دریا تو بینـــــم

به صحرا بنگرم صحرا تو بینـــــم

به هر جا بنگرم کوه ودر ودشت

نشان از قامت رعنا تو بینـــــــم

"When I look to the sea, the sea I see is you;

When I look to the prairie, the prairie I see is you.

Wherever I look, at the mountains or the plains

I see nothing but signs of your lofty stature."

And also in these couplets:

خوشا آنانکه الله یارشان بي

به حمد وقل هو الله کارشان بي

خوشا آنانکه دائم در نمازند

بهشت جاودان بازارشان بي

"O! Happy those whose friend is God

Their work is not but recitation of the Opening and the Sincerity.

O! Happy those who ever are in prayer

Whose market-place is the everlasting Paradise."

Those who have such a quality of the constant invocation of God (exemplified in the above poem as recitation of the Opening and the Sincerity, which are two Chapters of the Qur'an that Muslims, especially the Shi'a recite in their ritual prayers) do not think about their food or sleep and live in this world as a traveller who finds himself in a state of passing the Way towards God, his Beloved, as swiftly as possible and yearns for the vision of the Beloved.

Imam Zayn al 'Ābidin, the fourth Imam of Shi'ite Muslims, states certain attributes and states of the people who have engaged in the practice of invocation of God:

"My God,

Inspire us with Thy remembrance

Alone and in assemblies,

By night and day,

Publicly and secretly

In prosperity and adversity!

Make us intimate with silent remembrance.

Employ us in purified works and efforts pleasing to Thee,

And reward us with full balance,

My God,

Love-mad hearts are enraptured by Thee,

Disparate intellects are brought together by knowing Thee,

Hearts find no serenity except in remembering Thee,

Souls find no rest except in seeing Thee,

Thou art the glorified in every place,

The worshipped at every time,

The found at every moment,

The called by every tongue,

The magnified in every heart!

I pray forgiveness from Thee for

Every pleasure but remembering Thee,

Every ease but intimacy with Thee,

Every happiness but nearness to Thee,

Every occupation but obeying Thee,

My God,

Thou hast said – and Thy word is true –

*"O you who have faith,*

*Remember God with much remembrance*

*And glorify Him at dawn and in the evening!"*

Thou hast said – and Thy word is true –

*"Remember Me, and I will remember Thee,"*

And promised us that Thou wilt remember us thereby,

In order to ennoble, respect, and honour us.

Here we are, remembering Thee as Thou hast commanded us!

So accomplish what Thou hast promised,

O Rememberer of the rememberers!

O Most Merciful of the merciful!"[2]

As indicated in this whispered prayer, God the Almighty, frequently calls upon people to engage themselves in the act of constant invocation of God (*dhikr-e kathir*) in the Glorious Qur'an. Constant invocation of God implies the most important condition for the attainment of invocation by quality. Those who whish to attain this should engage themselves in constant invocation of God and follow the rules and rites of this sort of invocation.

Performing the ritual (daily) prayers and the recommended prayers (*nawāfil*) and recitation of the Glorious Qur'an in the mornings and at nights and abundant and conscious recitation of "*Allāhumma sall-i 'Alā Muhammad-in wa aal-i Muhammad*" (O' God bless Muhammad and his descendents!) are considered to be the most important examples of constant invocation and the best means of achieving the stage of invocation by quality.

One of the consequences of abundant invocation of God which is an inevitable implication of the invocation by quality is the burning flame of divine love within man. In his reference to this quality of invocation of God, Imam Zayn al-'Ābidin (may peace and blessing be upon him) in the prayer known as the Whispered Prayer of the Lovers (*Munājāt al-Muhībbīn*) says:

> "O God,
>
> Place us among those
>
> Whose habit is rejoicing in Thee and yearning for Thee,
>
> Whose time is spent in sighing and moaning!
>
> Whose foreheads are bowed down before Thy mightiness,
>
> Whose eyes are wakeful in Thy service,

Whose tears are flowing in dread of Thee,

Whose hearts are fixed upon Thy love;

Whose cores are shaken with awe of Thee.

O He

the lights of whose holiness induce wonder in the eyes of His lovers,

the glories of whose face arouse the longing of the hearts of his knowers!

O the Furthest Wish of the hearts of the yearners!

O the Utmost Limit of the hopes of the lovers!

I ask from Thee love for Thee,

Love for those who love Thee,

Love for every work which will join me to Thy nearness,

And that Thou makest Thyself more beloved to me than anything other than Thee,

And makest my love for Thee lead to Thy good pleasure, and my yearning for Thee protect against disobeying Thee!"

**3.3.** Invocation by detachment and annihilation (*Dhikr-e tajarrud wa finā*): This is the highest or the supreme stage of invocation or remembrance of God with which the near-stationed (*muqarrabān*) in the divine Empyrean are adorned. In this stage of invocation the invoker is transformed into pure remembrance or invocation of God and all his existence is lovingly annihilated in the invocation of God. His words, his silence, his waking, his

sleep, his association with others, his activities, his conduct, his sadness, his delight, his laughter, his crying, all become the invocation of God. The noblest example of such people is the holy being of the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him and his household). The holy Prophet of Islam is described in the Glorious Qur'an as *Dhikr* (Reminder):

> "...*So* fear *you (the wrath of) God! O' ye with understanding who believe! Indeed hath God sent down unto you a reminder, an Apostle who recites unto you the clear signs of God that he may bring out those who believe and do good deeds from the darkness unto light."* (65:10 & 11)

Such people are not only considered to be not only the very remembrance of God but also the ones who, when they reside in a place or take part in an assembly illuminate it with the light of remembrance. Anyone who comes in contact with them can benefit from the light of remembrance of God and if someone loves these near-stationed people, then this will also be considered remembrance of God. The divine light is illuminated in them and wherever they reside their existence is the locus of manifestation of God and His Grace. An outstanding example of this is the holy Prophet Muhammad and his family. They are explicitly characterized in the Glorious Qur'an:

> "*God is the Light of heavens and the earth; the similitude of His Light is a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass; the glass is as it were a star shining bright, lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, the olive whereof almost gloweth forth (of itself), (even) though fire toucheth it not. Light upon Light: God guideth unto his Light whomsoever he willeth; and God setteth forth parables for people; and God is All-aware of all things. (That Lamp is lit) in houses which God hath permitted to be exalted and His*

*name be mentioned therein, therein declare glory unto Him in the mornings and the evenings. Men whom neither merchandise nor any sale diverteth from the remembrance of God and constancy in prayer and paying the poor-rate, they fear the day when the hearts and eyes shall writhe of the anguish."* (24:35-37)

The most distinguished figures of this stage of invocation of God can serve as guides for the wayfarers towards God. This is not a quality that everybody can partake of. It is incumbent upon one who longs to journey towards God and attain this station of invocation to follow the spiritual teachings and guidance they provide. These distinguished invokers or reminders are characterized by being in constant invocation of God. They constantly invite others to follow their ways, to which only a chosen few can gain access. Not just anybody can turn their heart towards the remembrance of God and serve as a Light which illuminates neglectful hearts and awakens the depressed conscience and purifies and washes away all internal impurities. This enterprise can be accomplished only by the constant invokers who, having been annihilated in the invocation of God, have become the locus of the manifestation of God and a radiation of His Divine Light.

As for the most outstanding quality of these invokers, one can refer to the fact that not only do they illuminate individuals' hearts with the Divine Light but they also provide assemblies, communities, and nations all over the world, and even the human race, with illumination throughout the ages. Furthermore, if people in all corners of the world listen to their life-giving words and gain access to their spiritual teachings, their lives will be totally absorbed in light for ever, a quality with which only the constant invoker is equipped.

In referring to this stage of constant and excess invocation and the quality of invokers, Imam Ali says:

"Certainly Allah, the Glorified, has made His remembrance the shine for hearts that hear with its help despite deafness, see with its help despite blindness and become submissive with its help despite unruliness. In all the periods and times when there were no prophets there have been people to whom Allah whispered through their wits and spoke to through their minds. With the help of the bright awakening of their ears, eyes, and hearts they keep remembrance of the days of Allah and make others fearful before the rigor and majesty of God. They are the guide-points in wildernesses. Whoever adopts the moderate way (of life) they praise his ways and give him the tidings of deliverance, but whoever goes right and left they vilify his ways and frighten him. In this way they served as lamps in the darkness and guides through doubt. There are some people devoted to remembrance of Allah who have adopted remembrance in place of worldly matters so that commerce or trade does not turn them away from it. They pass their life on it. They speak into the ears of the neglectful people, warning against the matters held unlawful by Allah. They order them to practice justice (and they themselves practice it) and warn them to refrain from the unlawful (and they themselves refrain from it). It is as though they have finished the journey of this world towards the next world and beheld what lies beyond it. Consequently they have become acquainted with all that befell them in the interstice during their long stay therein, and the Day of Judgment fulfilled its promises for them. Therefore, they removed the curtain from these things for the people of the world till it was as though they were seeing what people did not see

and were hearing what people did not hear." (*Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 219)

By following these chosen divine people, those who have attained the stage of invocation of God they are, in turn, capable of transferring the light and invocation of God to other human beings, making use of the teachings and spiritual guidance of great invokers. Today the healing solution of the wounded hearts of mankind is to make use of the spiritual teachings and guidance of these great invokers. These people can open up ways to paths of peace, friendship, love, compassion, equality, brotherhood, happiness, salvation and spirituality for modern societies who face serious spiritual crises.

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[1] See also 21:50; 36:69; 21:24; 81:27; 76:29.

[2] *The Psalms of Islam (Al-Sahifat al-Kāmilat al-Sajjādiyyah)*,The Whispered Prayer of the Rememberers [ 81] XIII, pp.255, 256 Translated by William C. Chittick)

# The Principle and the Practice of the Remembrance of God: An Islamic Perspective

**Reza Shah-Kazemi**

> *"Verily the formal prayer keeps one away from lewdness and iniquity; and the remembrance of God is greater."*(29:45)[1]

This paper will explore the different dimensions to the notion of the 'remembrance of God' (*dhikrullah*) in the Islamic context. The principal argument is that this type of remembrance constitutes the very essence of religious devotion, both in principle and in practice. In principle, remembrance is understood as consciousness of the divine reality and is the goal of worship in all its different forms. In practice, remembrance is also an activity, an all-embracing contemplative practice, which is to be accomplished and not merely thought about. This interplay between the principle and the practice of remembrance will be examined in relation to a series of key verses in the Holy Qur'an and in the light of the sayings of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali b. Abi Talib.[2] These sayings go far in elucidating the meaning of the 'remembrance of God', and highlight the ways in which the inner realization of this remembrance transcends the plane on which formal prayer and outward action operate.

The verse cited in the above epigraph clearly establishes the principle that the remembrance of God is the summit of prayer, and thus of all religious practices. Indeed, it is presented as the quintessence of all such practices, the remembrance of God being

the very purpose for which the rites of religion have been instituted, *"establish the prayer for the sake of My remembrance"* (20:14),[3] the Muslims are told. The very purpose and goal of the prayer, its spiritual value and substance, is thus the remembrance of God. This remembrance is therefore 'greater' than the prayer itself in the measure that the goal transcends the means, the essence surpasses the form, and inner realization takes priority over outward practice. There is no prayer, no rite, no ritual that is separable from His remembrance; and remembrance cannot be exclusively identified with any one of its possible modes.

This pre-eminence of the remembrance of God is affirmed by numerous sayings of the Prophet. To take just one as an example, he once asked his companions:

> "Shall I not tell you about the best and purest of your works for your Lord, and the most exalted of them in your ranks, and the work that is better for you than giving silver and gold, and better for you than encountering your enemy, with you striking their necks and them striking your necks?"

Thereupon the people addressed him and said: "What is that, O Emissary of God?" He said,

> "The perpetual invocation of God—exalted and glorious (*dhikrullah 'azza wa jalla dā'iman*)."[4]

What, then, does the 'remembrance of God', *dhikrullah* mean? As regards the lexical meanings of the word *dhikr*, the most important, in the context of Islamic spirituality, are those of remembrance and invocation. The first relates to the principle of the awareness of divine reality, the only reality there is; the second pertains to the means by which this consciousness of God is to be attained. These means include prayer, supplication, glorification, praise, meditation, reflection and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an, but are centred upon the continuous repetition

or invocation of the Name or Names of God. *Dhikr* in the sense of remembrance, then, denotes spiritual consciousness, and *dhikr* in the sense of invocation refers to the central methodical practice that generates this consciousness. Both of these meanings must be borne in mind whenever the Arabic word *dhikr* is used. In what follows, the word will be translated as 'remembrance' or 'invocation' depending on the context in which it is used, but each time one of these terms is employed, the other meaning should be understood as implicit.

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The notion of the 'remembrance of God' takes us to the very heart of the Islamic message. This message, reduced to its most essential and hence universal dimensions, can be summed up in the very word *dhikr*. This is because it is the purpose of divine revelation to 'remind' man, to make him recall that knowledge which is already ingrained in the depth of his inmost being, is at the core of his intellect, is woven into the very texture of his heart and is the ultimate seat of consciousness. This knowledge of the reality of the Absolute has been clouded since the Fall, but not abolished by it. What is needed to revive this knowledge is not some extraneous item of information dictated from without, but a divinely revealed message that acts as a catalyst, a leaven for bringing the latent knowledge within to the surface. Were it not for the existence of this innate and pre-personal knowledge of the Absolute, one would not be in a position to discern and affirm - to 're-cognise' - that the revelation is indeed a message from that self-same Absolute.

The Qur'an refers in several places to this innate knowledge of supernatural realities within the human intellect. For example, there is mention that, prior to the manifestation of creation, God took all the souls that would be born in the world from the loins of Adam and ask them to testify,

> *"Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, we testify. [This is] lest ye say on the Day of Resurrection: Truly of this we were unaware."* (7:172)

In other words, nobody can plead ignorance on the Day of Judgement. Likewise, these divine realities can be understood with reference to the spirit animating the human form, and articulating human consciousness:

> *"Then He fashioned [man] and breathed into him of His Spirit* (32:9).

This doctrine is also implied in the fact that God taught Adam the 'names', the essences, of things, *"And He taught Adam the names, all of them..."* (2:31). Therefore, the divine spirit in man, together with the knowledge it contains, is the basis on which the angels were commanded to prostrate to Adam by God (15:28-29). Furthermore, it is this spirit that defines the innermost, primordial nature of man, his *fitra*, patterned upon the divine nature itself,

> *"...the nature of God (fitrat Allah), that according to which He created man"* (30:30).

Each person's apparent lack of knowledge is the result of the covering over of his heart by the 'rust' of worldliness, of egotism and of sin,

> *"Nay, but what they have earned is rust upon their hearts"* (83:14).

To remove this rust it is not only virtue but also, and pre-eminently, the remembrance of the Real that is necessary. Moral conscience must be combined with spiritual consciousness if man's primordial nature is to be restituted. The necessity of these two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical, is expressed in the following verses, which refer to the fallen state of humanity together with the means of overcoming it,

> *"By the Age. Truly man is in a state of loss; except those who have faith and act virtuously..."* (103:1-3)

The vertical dimension is referred to in terms of faith, and the horizontal in terms of virtue. The last verse continues, *"...and exhort one another to Truth and exhort one another to patience;"* reinforcing the necessity of combining the two dimensions.

To focus more sharply on the vertical or spiritual aspect of the restitution of man's primordial nature, namely the remembrance of God, the following important exegesis of the words of the Qur'an by Imam 'Ali can be considered, *"men whom neither commerce nor trade diverteth from the remembrance of God"* (24:37). The Imam makes comments as below on this verse:

> "Truly God has made the remembrance (*al-dhikr*) a polish for the hearts, by which they hear after being deaf, and see after being blind and yield after being resistant.[5] ... Indeed there is a special group (*ahl*) who belong to the *dhikr*; they have adopted it in place of the world, such that *neither trade nor commerce* distracts them from it. They spend the days of their life in it ... It is as though they had quitted this world for the Hereafter, and they are there, witnessing what is beyond this world ...."[6]

According to this, the remembrance of God is the principal means by which His revelation comes to be faithfully reflected in the mirror of the heart; the principles immanent within the intellect are brought to light by the message from the Transcendent. This is precisely one of the functions of revelation, according to the Imam. In one of his most important sermons, the Imam holds that God sent His prophets to mankind:

> "to remind them of His forgotten graces ... to unearth for them the buried treasures of the intellect..."[7]

Thus, the purpose of revelation is not so much to teach man the principles that are essential for salvation, principles of which he is *a priori* ignorant; but rather, it is to 're-mind' him of those principles that are 'buried' deep within his intellect; those principles that are hidden behind clouds of forgetfulness generated by egotism, vanity and pride. The process by which man comes to realize this innate spiritual knowledge (the 'remembrance of God' in the highest sense) can be referred to as the inner revelation of the intellect, for, according to the Imam, "The prophet of a man is the interpreter of his intellect (*rasulu al-rajuli tarjumānu 'aqlihi*)."[8]

Intellection from within reflects revelation from without. In the felicitous phrase of Frithjof Schuon, intellection is the revelation of the microcosm, just as revelation is the intellection of the macrocosm.[9] This is the natural parallel of the identification of revelation with remembrance, an identification made in the Qur'an itself in several places. For example,

> "*Verily We have revealed the remembrance (al-dhikr) and verily We shall be its preserver*" (15:9)

> "*...And God hath revealed a reminder (dhikran), a Prophet reciting unto you the verses of God...*" (65:10-11).

It should be noted that this notion of remembrance embraces all previous revelations; it is not restricted to the Qur'an alone. The essence of the revealed message is one and the same, however different the outward forms that encase it are, and however varied the rulings, the rites and the rituals that attendant upon the different revelations are:

> *"Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee."* (41:43)[10]

Just as the essence of the revelations is identical (they all preach the message of *tawhid*, affirm the One Reality, that of Islam, to conform to this One Reality) so, one finds a remarkable unanimity, within widely divergent religious traditions, regarding the quintessential means of performing this affirmation and realizing this conformity: the methodical invocation of a Name of the Absolute. The Names may differ but the Named is one and the same. This does not mean that any name we care to choose to refer to the Absolute becomes a valid name for Him, but that any name of the Absolute *revealed* by the Absolute is a valid 'Name' of God, and its invocation, by man, leads to the realization of Him, by virtue of the grace inherent in the Name. This is a principle that will be discussed in further detail at a later point.[11]

The important point related to spiritual method is made clear in the Imam's supplication entitled *Dua' al-Mashlul,* the supplication of the lame man.[12] A dazzling array of divine Names and qualities are called upon in this supplication, and towards its end one reads the following verse, which provides the key for the whole supplication, and aids in the understanding of the invocation:

> "I ask Thee by every Name with which Thou hast named Thyself".[13]

The fact that God has named Himself imparts a divine power to the Names, a power to make God truly present and active in one's consciousness and being. The Names are sacramental prolongations of the Named, charged with the divine presence, and thus with an infinite power of integration and attraction. They are not ordinary words or mere signs established by human convention, as modern linguistics and semiotics advocate. The Qur'an refers to such conventional names in the following verse,

addressed to the pagan polytheists of Mecca who worshipped idols created by them and named by them,

> *"These are but names which ye have named—ye and your fathers before you—for which God hath revealed no authority."* (53:23)

The divine authority (*sulṭān*) which invests a name with revealed substance is that which alone has the power to transform the soul; it is thus that the invocation of the Name leads to the Named. For the invocation to have this ultimate transformative impact, three conditions are indispensable, one is methodical, another is liturgical and the third is moral. The first, methodic condition is that the invocation has to be performed 'much', in principle, always:

> *"O ye who believe! Invoke God with much invocation"* (33:42);
>
> *"And invoke the Name of thy Lord morning and evening."* (76:25);
>
> *"And invoke the Name of thy Lord, devoting yourself to it with utter devotion."* (73:8)

These verses are not to be taken in the abstract, but as concrete injunctions upon which the Prophet and his closest companions acted in all earnestness. Sound historical sources record that the Prophet spent long hours each night in prayer, and the Qur'an likewise affirms,

> *"Truly thy Lord knows that thou standest in prayer close to two-thirds of the night, and half of it, and a third of it—thou and a group of those with thee..."* (73:20)[14]

While it is true that much of these night vigils would be taken up with recitation of the Qur'an, a form of remembrance as noted

earlier, the practice of the invocation would also have been prominent as is obvious from the verses cited above.

The Imam makes clear, in disarmingly simple terms, why the invocation should be given such importance; why devotion to God should be expressed, among other things, through the invocation of His name when he says,

> 'He who loves a thing dedicates himself fervently to its invocation.'[15]

This fervent dedication to the remembrance of God is well expressed in the following verses which describe the state of 'people of substance'. These are people who *"remember God standing, sitting, and reclining on their sides and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth..."* (3:191)

An additional importance of this verse is that it highlights the supra-formal aspect of the invocation; the *dhikr* is presented here as the quintessence of all religious activity, or as the spiritual act *par excellence*. While the formal, canonical prayers are fixed in time, conditioned by various ritual requirements and accomplished through specific movements and formulas, the *dhikr*, by contrast, is described as something to be performed at all times, in all places and all postures. It is thus to be woven into the texture of everyday life rather than super-imposed upon life as an extraneous, formalistic practice. The aim, then, of the methodic practice of the invocation is to reach a condition where the remembrance of God is uninterrupted.

As seen earlier, the ideal state of the believer is one in which he is never distracted from the remembrance of God by outward activities. It has been stated many times that the believers are those who are 'perpetually at prayer' (*'alā ṣālātihim dā'imūn*) (70:23): they are not only regular in the performance of the canonical prayer at the appropriate times but there is no time when they are not 'in prayer', if one understands that 'prayer' is

the remembrance of God. The following saying of the Imam is relevant here:

> 'Continuous invocation is the food of the spirit and the key to prayer (*miftah al-salat*).'[16]

In light of this saying the Qur'anic verse: *"prayer keepeth [one] away from lewdness and iniquity, and the remembrance of God is greater"* (29:45) becomes easier to understand. The formal, canonical prayer is described here in negative or constraining terms: it is a *preventative*. Its very formality is defined as a ritual necessity, but it is also, unavoidably, an existential limitation. It is performed and operative at one time and not at another. It is expressed in certain forms and movements and not in others. In contrast, the remembrance of God is *"greater"* in that it is the positive, enlivening substance of prayer. It is that which liberates consciousness from the limits, verbal, mental and existential, by which all formal prayer is defined. Since all formal prayer is thus inescapably defined within certain limits, its *barakah* or blessedness, can also become confined all too easily, within those limits: one feels close to God only when praying, and not in one's everyday life, outside the prayer-times. It is *dhikr*, in the sense of recollection and awareness of God, that allows prayer (or the consciousness conditioned by prayer) to open out into its intended essence, into an awareness of the unconditional presence of God.

From the point of view of this awareness, even the formal nature of the canonical prayer ceases to be a limitation. The reality of the divine presence bestowed by the remembrance comes to suffuse all of one's prayers, and eventually, with the grace of God, all of one's being. The prayers, then, are integrated within one's all-embracing remembrance, rather than simply being performed as a religious obligation. This leads to the second of the conditions for the efficacy of *dhikr*, the liturgical condition. Despite the fact that the *dhikr* is 'greater' than the prayer, it cannot be performed except on the basis of the prayer and all the

formalities that condition the prayer. It transcends these formalities, certainly, but without this liturgical framework, the performance of the *dhikr* becomes nothing more than an individualistic and subjective initiative, deprived of the grace and Heavenly seal that protects, stabilizes and strengthens all the individual does by way of supererogatory practice. In the words of *hadith qudsi* (a 'holy utterance' by God on the tongue of the Prophet):

> "My slave draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My slave never ceases to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts (*nawāfil*) until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he grasps, and his foot by which he walks."[17]

While the obligatory prayers initiate man's movement towards God, those prayers offered to God not out of religious obligation but out of spiritual aspiration instead, lead to the mystery of loving communion. In this scenario, one is brought face to face with the ultimate degree of *tawhid*, mystical union and the *deificatio* or *theosis* referred to in the Christian tradition. But this mystical realization of *tawhid* cannot be attained without first accomplishing the effacement that prefigures it, which is *islam*; the obedient conformity to the will of God. Conformity to the outward religious obligations is thus not so much a formal constraint that prevents one from realizing the essence, but the very ground that one needs to ascend towards the essence.

This point of view is well expressed in the following saying of the Imam:

> "Do not remember God absent-mindedly (*sāhiyan*); nor forget Him in distraction; rather, remember Him with perfect remembrance (*dhikran kāmilan*), a remembrance in which your

> heart and tongue are in harmony, and what you hide conforms with what you disclose. But you will not remember Him according to the true reality of the remembrance (*haqiqat al-dhikr*) until you forget your own soul in your remembrance."[18]

The first part of this saying, stressing the need for harmony between the heart and the tongue, relates to the third condition for the invocation, that of virtue, which will be discussed shortly. The 'perfection' of remembrance refers to virtue, the harmony between the heart and the tongue, between the intention and the action; the ultimate 'reality' of remembrance, however, is predicated on what appears to be its very opposite: the most radical 'forgetting'.[19] It is in the invocation itself that this forgetting of oneself takes place: it is not possible to remember God according to the true reality of the remembrance "until you forget your own soul *in your remembrance*". The remembrance itself continues, but is no longer conditioned by individual consciousness. This can only mean that the seat of consciousness has shifted from the invoker to the Invoked: the reality or *haqiqah* of the *dhikr* is one with the object of Invocation, God Himself, *al-Haqq*, the Real. Esoterically, then, it can be said that the true agent of the invocation is God Himself. The invocation by man is but an outward appearance, an appearance which is extinguished by the very act of the invocation itself. The Imam expresses this esoteric truth in the following saying:

> "The invocation is not a formality of speech nor a way of thinking; rather, it comes forth, firstly, from the Invoked and secondly from the invoker."[20]

It is thus God Himself who performs the invocation, first and foremost. Man's invocation is but a shadow, a reflection, or a consequence of this divine invocation. This mystery will be discussed again, later.

To return to the first part of the above saying, relating to virtue, or the harmony between the heart and the tongue, the need for sincerity or for integral virtue must be stressed as one of the conditions of the practice of invocation. If one is invoking the divine Name, one's character must be governed by divine qualities. One must be as much 'like' God as possible, within the framework of one's potential, and this implies an active orientation towards all of the fundamental virtues until the soul reflects all the qualities of God. The Prophet instructed the Muslims:

> "make your moral qualities those of God. If the tongue is invoking the divine Name, the heart must be assimilating the divine nature, only then is there harmony between the two, only then is the invocation 'perfect'."

Likewise, there are verses from the Qur'an that say,

> *"Successful indeed is he who purifieth himself; and invoketh the Name of his Lord, and prayeth."* (87:14 & 15)

While the remembrance itself contributes to this purification in the most direct way, its efficacy will be deepened insofar as the soul is governed by virtue, or at least by virtuous intentions, and correspondingly diminished if there is no active striving after virtue, and no effort to rid oneself of error, sin and vice.

The following Qur'anic verses should also be noted in this context. They link the invocation of the divine with a variety of moral qualities:

> *"Call upon thy Lord in humility and in secret ... and call upon Him with fear and in hope."* (7:55 & 56)

> *"And invoke thy Lord within thyself, in humility and awe, and beneath thy breath, in the morning and in the night."* (7:205)

In other words, a deep-rooted orientation towards all of the fundamental qualities of the soul must accompany the invocation, the effectiveness of which is thereby deepened.

A final way in which the efficacy of the remembrance is enhanced, which will refer back to the mystery touched upon earlier, is that the invocation comes first from God and secondarily from man. This can be understood not only as an expression of the truth that man can do nothing without the grace of God, but also in relation to the very process of creation, of divine existentiation.

The following verse serves well as a starting point for the reflection that will bring this paper to a close,

> *"Hath there come upon man any moment in time when he was not a thing remembered?"* (76:1)

The time prior to man's creation is described as a 'moment' when he was not 'remembered' (*madhkur*). This implies that man's being 'remembered' is equivalent to his being created. Thus, for God to 'create' man is tantamount to a divine 'remembrance' of man: creation equals remembrance. Man is summoned by the *fiat lux*, not from some forgetfulness within God, *quod absit*, but from that hidden, pre-existential state from which he emerges into the light of creation. The creative word uttered by God, 'Be!' (*kun*), which brings the possibilities of being into existence can be seen in this light as a form of *dhikr*:

> *"His command, when he desireth a thing, is only that He saith unto it: Be! and it is"* (36:82)

If the divine *dhikr* is identified with creation, what does this imply for the human accomplishment of *dhikr*? Two processes

are implied in answer to this question. One is affirmative and the other is negative. In the first case, this is the active and conscious participation by man in the very reality underlying divine creativity. There is nothing more spiritually creative for man than performing the act which mirrors the divine Act of creation. As for the second case, it is the very opposite of creation: the effacement of the relative in the Face of the Absolute, stemming from the inverse analogy between man and God.[21] As the Imam says, the individual is 'forgotten' in the very act of invocation, and only then is the *haqiqah*, the ultimate spiritual reality, of the invocation attained. But attained by what or by whom, since individual awareness is no longer present? It can only be by God Himself, the true agent of the invocation. As the Imam put it, the invocation comes forth from the Invoked, from God Himself. The sole true agent of the invocation is also the only being in reality, and thus that which imparts to man whatever reality he possesses—or rather, is possessed by. Thus, the full metaphysical implication of the first testimony of Islam, *lā ilāha illallāh*, there is no god but God, is arrived at and comes to mean: there is no reality but the one and only Reality. It brings the realization that to 'make real' in the fullest sense, this one and only Reality is, by the same token, to realize the unreality, or the merely apparent reality of everything else. To remember God is thus to forget everything but God and it means finding that in fact, there is nothing but God in being. To return to the Imam's image of the heart 'polished' by the remembrance, the heart which 'sees' after being blind and which 'hears' after being deaf, the following conclusion can be drawn: the heart sees the Face of God wherever it looks, and hears the cosmic hymn of remembrance and praise chanted by the whole of creation. For, on the one hand:

> *"Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God"* (2:115).

And on the other:

*"...whosoever is in the Heavens and the earth praises God; and the birds in flight with outstretched wings—each knoweth its prayer and glorification"* (24:41).

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[1] All translations from the Qur'an are from Pickthall's, with modifications.

[2] This seminal figure was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, fourth Caliph of Islam, ancestor of all the descendants of the Prophet (known as 'Sayyids'), in addition to being regarded by the Shi'a as the divinely appointed heir and successor to the Prophet, and the first in the hereditary line of the Imams of Shi'i Islam (Twelvers, Ismailis and Zaydis alike). See Mohammed Jawad Chirri, *The Brother of the Prophet Mohammed* (2 vols.) (Detroit: The Islamic Center, 1979 & 1982) for the most comprehensive analytical biography of 'Ali—hereafter referred to as 'the Imam'—in the English language. The importance of the Imam for the whole of the Islamic intellectual tradition is summed up in the Prophet's saying: 'I am the city of knowledge, and 'Ali is its gate'. See ibid., pp. 273-276 for discussion of this saying.

[3] In verses describing the rites of pilgrimage, the Qur'an exhorts the Muslims to *"remember God by the sacred monument*, and to *remember God at the appointed days."* (2:198, 200, 203, *et passim.*)

[4] Cited in *Al-Ghazali—Invocations and Supplications*, (Book IX of The Revival of the Religious Sciences) Trans. K. Nakamura (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1990), p.8 (The translation of the last sentence of the saying is slightly modified.).

[5] Cf. the saying of the Prophet: 'For everything there is a polish, and the polish of the hearts is the *dhikrullah*.' Cited in *Al-Anwār al-Qudsiyyah fī Ma'rifa Qawā'id al-Sufiyyah* ('Holy Lights on the Knowledge of the Principles of Sufism'), 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani (Cairo: Dār Jawāmi' al-Kalim, 1987), p.29.

[6] *Nahj al-Baāghah*, Ed. Shaykh 'Azizullah al-'Utarudi (Tehran: Nahj al-Balaghah Foundation, 1993), p.260. See the full translation of this sermon in Sayed Ali Reza, *Peak of Eloquence* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1996), pp. 440-442. This work is a compilation of the sermons, letters and sayings attributed to the Imam in numerous works written in the first centuries of Islam.

[7] *Nahj al-Balāghaha*, p.11; *Peak*, p.95.

[8] *Ghurar al-Hikam* ('The Finest of Aphorisms') (under the Persian title, *Guftār-e Amir al-Mu'minin*), compiled by 'Abd al-Wahid Amidi (d. 1116/510), Persian edition and translation by Sayyid Husayn Shaykhul-Islami (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2000) p.595, no.2. The seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kazim, refers to the *'aql* as the 'inner proof' (*hujjah bātinah*) that corresponds to the prophets and saints, who constitute the 'outer proof' (*hujjah ẓāhirah*). See *Mizān al-Hikmah* ('The Scale of Wisdom'—a 10-volume compendium of hadiths, thematically arranged) (Qum & Tehran: Maktab al-I'lam al-Islami, 1983), vol. 6, p. 402, no. 13058.

[9] 'Thus there are two poles for the manifestation of Divine Wisdom, and they are: firstly, the Revelation "above us", and secondly the intellect "within us" ...' F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1994) p.57. Chapter II of this work, entitled 'The Qur'an', pp.39-93, is essential reading for any non-Muslim who wishes to understand how this text has been, and continues to be, the foundation of Islamic spirituality.

[10] Cf. *"And We sent no Messenger before thee but We inspired him [saying]: There is no God save Me, so worship Me."* (21:25)

[11] On the plane of religious practice, this practice of invocatory prayer provides evidence of the inner unity of the religious traditions. See the citations on the practice of invocation in diverse religious traditions, given by Whitall Perry in his *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), section entitled 'Colophon—Invocation', pp.1001-1042.

For an overview of the practice within the context of Islamic contemplative disciplines, See J.-L. Michon, 'The Spiritual Practices of Sufism', in *Islamic Spirituality—Foundations*, vol. 1, ed. S. H. Nasr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 265-293.

[12] It is said that this was recited to a youth who had been stricken on account of sins he had committed against his father. After reciting the prayer, he saw the Prophet in a dream. The Prophet passed his hands over the youth's body and then said 'Safeguard God's greatest Name, for your work will turn out well.' The youth woke up and was healed. See *Supplications—Amir al-Mu'minin*, Tr. W.C. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1995), p.43.

[13] Ibid., verse 109, p.60.

[14] In his letter to Mālik al-Ashtar, appointing him Governor of Egypt, the Imam stresses the importance of night vigils, even for one whose days would be filled with a multitude of administrative tasks: 'Give unto God of your body [i.e. your vital energy] in your nights and your days, and perform fully that by which you draw near to God, doing so perfectly, without becoming dull or deficient, exerting your bodily energy to its utmost.' *Nahj al-Balāghah*, op. cit., p. 378-9; *Peak of Eloquence*, op. cit., p. 543.

[15] *Ghurar*, op. cit., no. 8528, p. 690.

[16] Ibid., no.10456, p.836

[17] *Sahih al-Bukhāri*, (Summarized), Tr. M.M. Khan (Madinah: Maktabat Dār-us-Salām, 1994), no. 2117, p. 992. See also Kulayni, M., *Al-Kāfi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyah, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 352.

[18] *Ghurar*, op. cit., no. 7524, p.621.

[19] Note this remarkable saying, found in the canonical collection of Ibn Hanbal: "Increase the *dhikrullah* until they say: madman (*majnun*)!" For this and several other hadiths of similar import, together with relevant Qur'anic verses relating to the *dhikr*, see the Shaykh al-'Alawi's powerful rebuttal of accusations made against the Sufis by 'reformers' in Algeria in the 1920s and 1930s, in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century—Shaikh AHmad al-'Alawi* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 93-95.

[20] *Ghurar*, op. cit., no.2098, p.135.

[21] As Schuon puts it, whereas the pronunciation by God of His Name determines creation, 'man, for his part, when pronouncing the same Name, describes the inverse movement ... in man, it does not create, but on the contrary "undoes", and that in a divine manner, since it brings man back to the Principle.' Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p.126.

# Contemplation in Islamic Spirituality

**Mahnaz Heydarpoor**

This paper studies a very important subject in Islamic thought and particularly in Islamic spirituality, namely contemplation. In Islamic scriptures, there are several similar notions that can be considered to fall under the umbrella of "contemplation", such as *tafakkur*, *tadabbur* and *ta'ammuq*.

Tafakkur means thinking, reflection or contemplation. It may even mean meditation in some instances. It is derived from the root "*fikr*" which means thought. Tadabbur also means reflection or pondering. It is derived from the root "*dubur*" which means back. Thus, tadabbur originally means to see or observe what is behind or at the back; the things that existed before us. Ta'ammuq means deep thinking. It is derived from the root "'*umq*" which means depth. Thus, t'ammuq involves going into depth and not just being satisfied with the superficial aspect of reality. According to a well-known hadith, God has revealed certain parts of the Qur'an including Chapter al-Tawhid (112) and the first verses of Chapter al-Hadid (57) because He knew that there will be a group of deep thinkers (*aqwāmun muti'ammiqūn*) at the end of time (*ākhir al-zamān*).[1]

Thus, all these terms indicate nearly the same notion of contemplation. The emphasis that Islam has placed upon this notion, as will be seen in more details later, is extremely significant and illustrates the weight it gives to the intellectual aspect of human beings. According to the Qur'an, we are created to serve and worship God (51:56). The "Right Path" is one of

serving and worshiping (36:61). However, this does not just mean that one must get involved in the physical acts of worship. The physical or even emotional involvement in prayers or recitations of the Book does not suffice if God is forgotten or not known properly. Of course, acts of worship are very important and some of them are compulsory, but the philosophy behind them is to prepare us for knowing and remembering God and getting close to Him. The Qur'an says:

> *"Worship Me and establish the prayer for My remembrance."* (20:14)

At the end of chapter three of the Qur'an, God praises a group of people who remember Him in different states and who are thoughtful. The verses read as follows:

> *"Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding. Those who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and think deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): 'Our Lord! You have not created (all) this without purpose, glory to You! Give us salvation from the torment of the Fire.'"* (3:190 & 191)

People of understanding or thoughtful people are therefore those who first remember God constantly and secondly, think deeply about the purpose of creation. Both facts can be found in many other verses or hadiths. According to a well-known divine saying (*al-hadith al-qudsi*), God says, "My remembrance is good in all circumstances".[2] It is for this reason that Muslim jurists recommend the remembrance of God or the mention of His names and attributes, even in the most private moments of one's day.[3] There are also hadiths detailing that everything has a limit except the remembrance of God, which has no limit. For example, the compulsory daily prayers consist of only 17 units. It is recommended to say more prayers but there are also

circumstances in which one may be asked not to say their prayers. An example is when the life of an innocent person is in danger. The quantity of fasting has further been clearly defined. In the month of Ramadan, fasting is compulsory and on ordinary days of the year it is recommended. However, there are circumstances in which one is not allowed to fast as well as circumstances in which one is recommended not to fast. The same is true for all other acts of worship. It is only the remembrance of God that can and should be done in all circumstances.

It is of the utmost importance to be *spiritually alert* and not to let anything lead to neglect or forgetfulness of God. There are many people in the society who look conscious but they are really unconscious and negligent. They are not alert. On the other hand, thoughtful people are those who are spiritually conscious and alert all the time. The Qur'an speaks about a group of people

> *"whom neither trade nor sales (business) diverts from the remembrance of God, nor from performing prayer, nor from giving alms. They fear a Day when hearts and eyes will be overturned (out of the horror of the torment of the Day of Resurrection)."* (18:37)

The above verse makes it very clear why Islam places so much emphasis on qualities like knowledge, remembrance and contemplation. According to Islamic hadiths, "contemplation for a while is more privileged than worshiping for a year".[4] Therefore, a worshiper (*'ābid*) who worships God in a mosque or temple or in a desert or cave for a year without thinking or contemplating is less privileged than a believer who contemplates for a much shorter period of time. There are also hadiths which state that contemplation for a while is more advantageous than worshiping for sixty years.[5] This is, of course, dependent upon the quality of contemplation and worship and the role of worship is not to be underestimated.

The evidence provided serves to emphasize the importance of contemplation. In other words, it shows the importance of contemplation in contrast to physical acts of worship that lack contemplation of the heart. There is no question about the value of a person's worship when they do it out of contemplation, or when it is accompanied by contemplation.

Similarly, the recitation of the Qur'an and even looking at its words are highly recommended, but it does not suffice to recite the Qur'an or even memorize it if there is no awareness of, and contemplation about its contents. The Qur'an blames those who do not reflect on it. For example, we read in verse 47:24:

> *"Do they not then reflect on the Qur'an, or are their hearts locked up (from understanding it)?"*

The people mentioned here either do not reflect at all or may reflect but cannot come to a proper conclusion because their hearts are locked or sealed.

If one mixes worship and contemplation together, the outcome will be one of the best. It is possible to worship God by contemplation as was demonstrated by Abu Dharr, a well-known companion of the Prophet. According to one hadith, "Most of the worship of Abu Dharr was contemplation".[6] Many Islamic hadiths propagate that a very privileged form of worship is to continue thinking or constantly contemplate God and His power.[7]

It is clear that Islam gives high regard to contemplation and considers that contemplation for a while is better than mere worshipping for one year or even for sixty or seventy years. In addition, it exemplifies the worship of pious people that consists of contemplation and promotes constant contemplation as the most privileged form of worship.

**Why is contemplation so important?**

Having studied the importance of contemplation, the question now arises as to why it is considered so important. Some of the benefits of contemplation are as follows:

**1.** Contemplation expands, deepens and stabilizes understanding. In a very beautiful conversation with Hisham b. al-Hakam on the intellect (*al-'aql*), Imam Kazim (A.S) states, "By contemplation, one believes in what he learns."[8] One may know that God exists or that there will be Heaven and Hell, but these beliefs may still be superficial or loose in one's heart. Consequently, they can easily be washed away or at least, be ignored or neglected. Hence, one may know that God exists but may still forget Him or disobey Him with relative ease. However, when someone knows something and then contemplates and reflects on it, it becomes like pressing a seed deep into the soil and then nurturing it till it grows and bears flowers. When something is well rooted in the heart, it will become stable. This is a very important idea.

Inspired by hadiths indicating the necessity of daily assessment of one's activities (*al-muhāsabah*), Muslim scholars have suggested that an important step in getting closer to God is to allocate some time for reflection each day, maybe in the early morning or before going to sleep.[9] In fact, this can be done at any time, even for example, before or after a daily prayer or when reciting the Qur'an. In this way, instead of a fast recitation each sentence will be recited individually and will be pondered upon.

**2.** Contemplation brings harmony to one's soul. Many people have had the experience where they knew something but did something else and, in this way, suffered a lack of harmony. A good example is that of smoking, which is known to be harmful. Even the people who do it know its harmful effects but they choose to ignore them. If they were to think about them and contemplate them in detail, they may find the determination to do what they know to be good.

When you think about something you let the mental or intellectual aspect of your being get control over the emotional aspect. Most people are easily moved by their emotions, but if we think about out future, about our present state, about our desires and aims, about our origins and about what we should or should not do, it would make our minds and hearts alert and cause our intellectual aspect to gain superiority over our emotions. A lack of alertness often leads to automatic responses and/or actions, and a quick loss of control, whereas thought before an action, speech or writing results in better control of every situation. This is why history tells of people who used to put some sand or small stones in their mouths to prevent them from speaking too quickly. Whenever they wanted to say something they were first compelled to take the sand or stones out of their mouth and the time spent doing this could be used to think about whether or not what they were about to say was necessary. This practise is not being endorsed here; rather the point beyond it is being appreciated. We read in hadiths that the heart of the fool lies behind his tongue, meaning that the fool first talks and then thinks about what they have said. In contrast, the wise person thinks first and talks later.

**3.** Contemplation prevents self-admiration. In Islamic spirituality, self-admiration is considered to be one of the worst qualities of the human soul and very destructive.[10] Unfortunately, believers sometimes suffer from this ugly characteristic, especially when they have been able to perform good service to the community or some difficult act of worship. Contemplation aids the understanding that whatever a person does is only possible by the divine grace and is not at all valuable compared with the blessings that God has bestowed. Moreover, although contemplation is the most privileged act of worship, it is far from self-admiration since it involves no physical act. If a person performs physical worship then he may say, "I am very good person. I have said so many prayers or I have recited this many chapters of the Qur'an". But if he is just sitting and thinking he is less likely to face self-admiration because he has done nothing;

no physical activity. Contemplation is not usually considered to be an act. Of course, in reality, it is a very important act, but most people find themselves indulging in self-admiration when they are involved in physical worship. There is also less chance for showing off where contemplation is concerned, since it is not visible. Of course, if a person is really wicked it is possible for him to show off in this regard too.

Through contemplation, it can be understood that human acts are worthless compared to the blessings of God and this in turn helps to safeguard people from any sort of self-admiration.

4. Contemplation mobilizes our power. Each person is like a country with different resources and powers. Usually these resources are not optimally invoked and the powers are not maximally used. They may even be in conflict with each other, but when there is a wise leadership all these things can be oriented and mobilized for the interests of the country. Something similar can be said about individual human beings. Through contemplation, one can exercise a more conscious and enlightened control over one's faculties and use them towards one's ideals. One can fully observe prospective consequences of every single action and, therefore, can make wiser decisions. It is recommended in Islamic hadith that "Whenever you decide to do something, contemplate upon its end."[11]

## Objects of contemplation

Naturally, in order for contemplation to have the desired effects mentioned above, the objects of contemplation have to be defined. The most important objects of contemplation are as follows:

1. **God:** The most precious object to remember and think about is God, the Almighty. Reflection should revolve around God's creation of humans, what He has done to us and what

He expects from us. Thought should also be put into the divine attributes so that closeness to Him and resemblance of Him can be obtained as much as possible.

2. **Creation:** Thinking about God's acts, especially about His act of creation leads to contemplation about those created by God. As explained earlier, the Qur'an says,

> *"Those who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and think deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): "Our Lord! You have not created (all) this without purpose, glory to You! Give us salvation from the torment of the Fire"".* (3:191)

Among His creatures are some that are very outstanding, like the human being. Thought should be spent on the creation of mankind and the purpose beyond their creation. People of good or bad character who lived in the past and then perished should also be contemplated. It is recommended to recite the following verses whenever historical places, such as palaces, houses, gardens and the like are visited:

> *"How many of the gardens and fountains have they left!*
>
> *And cornfields and noble places!*
>
> *And goodly things wherein they rejoiced;*
>
> *Thus (it was), and We gave them as a heritage to another people."* (44:25-28)

We should take lessons from such visits and not just photos.

3. **One's destiny:** Everyone should always think about his/her future. This requires planning for one's life and then observing any successes or failure that might occur.

**Death and life after death:** Remembrance and contemplation of death and the next world are highly recommended in Islam. The Qur'an talks about resurrection and the Day of Judgement in one third of its verses. Thinking about death is considered to be a source of vitality, awakening and determination. It is narrated from the Prophet Muhammad that the he said:

> "The best worship is to *remember* death and the best contemplation is the remembrance of death."[12]

4. **Duties and responsibilities:** One must always reflect on the circumstances in which one lives and the responsibilities that one has in those circumstances. A believer does his best to discover his duties and performs them in order to please God. It is narrated from the Prophet Muhammad that he said:

> "Contemplate in abundance on what you do!"[13]

5. **Words of God and sayings of the Prophet and Imams:** Describing the pious people, Imam Ali says,

> "...During night they are erect on their feet reading portions of the Qur'an and reciting it haltingly, creating through it grief for themselves and seeking by it the cure for their ailments. If they come across a verse creating eagerness (for Paradise) they bend towards it, coveting and their spirit turns towards it eagerly, and they feel as if it is in front of them. And when they come across a verse which contains fear (of Hell) they bend the ears of their hearts towards it and feel as though the sound of Hell and its cries are reaching their ears." [14]

## Some suggestions for better contemplation

**I.** Choose a proper time and place. Those who are strong in their faith or at least enjoy a strong concentration may be able to contemplate in different circumstances and various environments. However, it is better and indeed for most people necessary, to choose a convenient place and suitable time. As regards the place, it is better to choose, as much as possible, a tidy and elegant place where nothing to distract a person's attention exists. As regards time, it is better to contemplate when one is not sleepy or very tired or very hungry or very thirsty as in these cases, contemplation will not be very fruitful. Contemplating when full is also unproductive. There are many hadiths in this regard. For example, Imam Ali says:

> "Whoever eats less his thoughts become clearer."[15]
>
> "Who can have clear thought while his stomach is full?"[16]

**II.** Regularity is also very important.[17] If contemplation always takes place in the same environment or at the same times, it will automatically aid better preparation for contemplation.

**III.** Continuity plays a vital role too. It is much better to have a short period of contemplation on a daily basis rather than longer periods of contemplation once a week or several times a month.

**IV.** To choose some passages of the scripture relating to one's feeling or condition at the time of contemplation is very helpful and inspiring. There are also supplications, specifically prescribed for different situations. There may also be personal attachments to certain passages or supplications. Of course, this selective reading and contemplation should be arranged in a way so that one is also able to read and contemplate the entire Qur'an now and then.

**V.** To observe the presence of God. In order to direct one's heart and mind towards one's supreme interests and higher desires and in order to get rid of selfishness and short-sightedness during contemplation, it is necessary to remind oneself that God is ever-present. All thoughts and decisions should take their form in the presence and with the full knowledge of God. To awaken the sense of God's presence, the Qur'an does not only state that God exists or that He knows us; rather it emphasizes that God is present everywhere, that He is always with us (29:4) and that He is *"closer to man than his jugular vein"* (50:16). God sees and hears us. Indeed, He is the All-hearing (*al-sami'*) and the All-seeing (*al-baṣir*). The Qur'anic verse, *"Does he not know that God does see?"* (96:14) suggests that human problems start when they forget this fact. The late Imam Khomeini used to say, "the universe is where God is present. Do not commit any sin in His presence."

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[1] *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 91 & *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 3, p. 263 & vol. 64, p. 371.

[2] *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 497 & *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 13, p. 343.

[3] There are also specific supplications prescribed in Islamic hadiths for all these states, such as being in the bathroom or going into bed.

[4] *Al-'Ayyāshi*, vol. 2, p. 208 & *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 86, p. 129.

[5] *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 66, p. 292.

[6] *Wasā'il al-Shi'ah*, vol. 15, p. 197.

[7] *Al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, p. 55.

[8] *Ibid*, vol. 1, p. 17.

[9] It is narrated from Imam al-Kazim that "whoever does not assess himself everyday is not one of us". (*Ibid*, vol. 2, p. 453)

[10] For example, see *Ibid*, vol. 2, pp. 313 & 314.

[11] *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 68, pp. 339 & 342.

[12] *Mustadark al-Wasā'il*, vol. 3, p. 104.

[13] Ibid., vol. 13, p. 143.

[14] *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 191.

[15] *Ghurar al-Hikam*, no. 7402.

[16] *Ibid*, no. 8155.

[17] For example, see *Ibid*, no. 11082 & 11080.

# Reflections on Prayer: A Muslim Perspective

**Mohammad Fanaei Eshkevari**

The heart of spiritual practice is prayer. It follows the remembrance of God, which is the way to attain nearness to God and the essence of spirituality. To remember God is to have God in one's heart in such a way that one never forgets Him. Forgetting or negligence (*ghaflah*) of God is being unaware of Him, which paves the ground for sin. But remembrance of God (*dhikr*) will give one the necessary power to avoid doing wrong. God gives the human being desires or instincts and a right way to fulfil them but humans often have the tendency to follow their own desires. This, combined with a negligence of God leads to sin. Some people attempt to refrain from sin by abandoning or fighting against desire but desire itself is not the sole cause of sin; only the combination of desire and negligence of God leads people astray. The Qur'an states that, *"God knows what you reveal and what you hide"* (24: 29). When a person remembers God constantly, he is always aware that God knows his thoughts and intentions; nothing is hidden from Him.

Awareness of the presence of God not only prevents disobedience but also encourages one to call on Him, which is the real meaning of prayer. Both love and fear of God play a role in this awareness. The best thing in the world for a human being is that God loves him. If the human responds by loving God in return, he will not want to jeopardize God's love by indulging in the short-term benefits of this world. The remembrance of God gives vitality to love and fear. As a result, the practice of the remembrance of God is essential for mystics. They follow the Qur'anic teaching that

states, *"remember God frequently"* (8:45) and believe that remembering God intensifies one's love for Him. Many times, love comes as an unexpected gift, but it can also be initiated and improved. For example, if a husband neglects his spouse, his love for her will naturally fade, but if he remembers her devotion to him, the choice she made to marry him, he may buy her a flower or think of her with a clean heart and his love for her may be renewed. God commands human beings to love, meaning they have the ability to love. Another example is that of nature-lovers. Some people love nature because they are disposed to see the beauty in it. Others though, do not like it but this dislike can be developed or improved upon. When a person learns to see nature as a work of God, it becomes beautiful for him. This may be easier amidst forests and mountains but with the use of the intellect, even the desert becomes beautiful. Seeing the desert as a collection of random effects will result in a very different view than seeing it as part of the overall plan of God. Even if one pauses to look at people, they will all become beautiful for him; each has a different and special gift to be appreciated.

Remembrance of God is in the heart but bringing it onto the tongue makes it more alive and gives it vitality. In prayer the remembrance of God that is in the heart is usually pronounced. Prayer has four aspects and the order in which they are discussed below is important.

Firstly, prayer is praise (*hamd*) of the beauty and magnificence of God. During prayer a person uses his blessings from God to pay attention to His greatness and magnificence.

Secondly, prayer is thanksgiving (*shukr*). In prayer a person thanks God for what they receive from Him. What humans receive from God is endless and uncountable. As the Qur'an says:

> *"If you count God's blessing, you will never number it; surely man is sinful, unthankful."* (14:34)

In his book of prose and poetry, *Golestān*, Sa'di begins his introduction by offering his gratitude and thanks to God. He admits that he is unable to thank God perfectly, partly because every act or word of thanksgiving requires further thanksgiving for the previous breath that was used in thanking God. Therefore, he would always be at least a breath behind in complete thankfulness. It is impossible for the human beings to give complete thanks to God but one must try one's best and God does not expect more than that.

Thirdly, prayer is asking for forgiveness (*istighfār*). The famous formula for this is "I ask forgiveness from God and turn repentant to Him." In one of his prayers, the fourth Imam, Ali b. Husayn Zayn al-'Abidin cries:

> "If I sin once and pray for a life time I cannot make up for the sin; only your blessing can clear and forgive me".

Fourthly, prayer is a petition: the asking for desires from God whether they are material or spiritual, individual or social. In the Qur'an and in hadiths man is ordered to ask for the good things of this world and the next and not be bashful in front of God. In addition, there is encouragement to ask for the needs and welfare of others alongside personal wishes. The words "we" and "us" are used in many prayers, indicating the awareness of being part of a larger community and acknowledging that God's care extends beyond oneself. A frequently recited prayer in the Qur'an says:

> *"Our Lord, give us good in this world, and good in the world to come; and guard us against the chastisement of the Fire."* (2:201)

A fuller appreciation of the nature of prayer can be developed by considering representative examples of prayer from two holy books. The first of these is the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is recited by a Muslim at least ten times a day. It reads:

*"In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,*

*Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Beings,*

*The All-merciful, the All-compassionate,*

*The Master of the Day of Judgment.*

*Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.*

*Guide us towards the straight path,*

*The path of those whom Thou hast blessed,*

*Not of those against whom Thou art wrathful,*

*Nor of those who go astray."*

The second prayer is from the Bible. It is recorded in Matthew (Matthew 6: 9-15) that Jesus said:

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

As we also have forgiven those who sin against us,

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

But rescue us from the evil one."

Remembering God and praying to him is equivalent to talking to Him, being with Him, and living with Him, while the recitation of the Qur'an is like God talking to the human. In this way, revelation is alive and related to one's own life. Different people can look at the scriptures in different ways. An unbeliever may read the scriptures as literature, to be understood and learned from. An ordinary believer will read the scriptures with the understanding that they were revealed by God to the Prophet. However someone who reads the scripture with a heart that is 'alive' will find that the verses take on a meaning as if they were revealed to him, personally. The same feeling can be attained while reciting prayers as it is an 'alive' contact, and conversation with God, in which the servant is the initiator.

Prayer in its higher form is coupled with contemplation. God is always present. Contemplation brings awareness of the presence of God, not through speculative reason but through the feeling of the heart. This awareness is more the result of love than discursive thinking. In discursive thinking there is a gap between the subject and object, whereas direct awareness shortens this distance and moves the person towards unity and the dissolution of individuality. 'I' as a separate, independent, self-subsistent entity, disappears (*fanā'*). The human being finds his true self in God (*baqā'*). He is not God, nor a part of God, but at the same time he is not apart from God. This paradoxical mystery is the essence of mystical metaphysics.

Prayer and contemplation (*dhikr* and *fikr*) should not be separated. Prayer without contemplation is not worth much. It is related by the Prophet that thinking for an hour is better than 70 years of worshiping without thought. It is through contemplation that one may realize that God is the source of all and it is the

combination of prayer and contemplation that leads to enlightenment.

The real ideas of mysticism (*'irfān*) are based in the prayers of the mystics, which come from their hearts, following their face-to-face communication with God. The books written by mystics are like a translation of the real language of mysticism into the language of common people. The prayers of the mystics are God-centred and are filled with the praise and glorification of God and then praise for the prophets, who carry the message of God, angels and sages. Their primary respect is for the message of God and then for the servant who brings and/or teaches the message. Ordinary believers have a direct relationship with God, but do not receive revelation from Him as the prophets did. For those close to God who love Him, their prayers express this love and a respect for what belongs to God.

From the prayers of the saints one learns about the relationship between a true servant of God and God in a language that is not that of the mere "brain/mind" and is not just a combination of letters. Rather, it is a fresh language, close to one's heart. This not only teaches a kind of metaphysics but also provides instruction for a way of life, for morality and dealing with the self and with others. The language is a language of asking, not only for worldly things but for things one needs for the total development of his body, soul and personality. This extends beyond individual and private needs to social and public needs. One asks for what makes the world a better place to live in, for the things one needs for perfection and spiritual development and for a good world according to the plan of God in dealing with the rights and dignity of others. One prays for what one can obtain by choice and also for what only God can provide.

Prayer and the remembrance of God should always be in a person's heart, but in addition, according to Islamic teachings, there should be time set aside for this on a daily basis. This time should be spent alone and some of it should be devoted to audible

prayer. An example is paying attention to one's health. There must be some specific time for exercise, but throughout the day one must use one's back and knees correctly. Exercise, if done with the exclusion of the other activities may be harmful. Life must be lived with balance: the body should be in balance with the spirit and this world should be in balance with the world to come. One must not live in this world in a way that will harm him in the eternal life. He must care for his body, but not in a manner that harms the soul. For example, one needs to eat but to steal food would be harmful to one's spirit.

The heart of all prayer is the awareness of a God-centred world in which one asks everything from God but at the same time remains active, doing his best. Some say that one should do what one can and then pray to God for what he cannot do. This is a separation of prayer from action. God wants both; one should act within one's capability while at the same time praying for God's help, even with small tasks. One needs to guard against the danger of his spirituality being separated from action and life within the world. Everyone has a responsibility towards others here on earth. One is encouraged to act and pray with the understanding that all he does is a part of his relationship with God. It is due to God's help that people are alive and able to act and pray; none of these things would be possible without His grace.

One of the benefits of prayer is peace of mind in this world, but prayer is not only for peace of mind. It must also encourage love. At the heart of spirituality is the motivating factor of love. Being motivated to the practice of spirituality by fear is good but not good enough. Loving God brings about love for others and encourages caring for them. One should see others, not as a means to an end or as instruments to meet one's needs, but as an end in themselves. A self-centred world-view is to love someone as long as one needs them. For example, Islam encourages love of one's parents as long as they live and not only for as long as they are of benefit. As a person improves intellectually and

spiritually, his needs and attentions change. His attention gradually moves from that of personal desire for wealth, fame and other worldly privileges, to a concern for all of humanity.

Part of prayer, in addition to asking, is teaching oneself how to act and, more importantly, how to be. The best manner of moral education is self-education and everyone has their own teacher in this regard. Through the language of prayer one can be honest in his/her conversation with God and thus be active in moral self-education. Preachers talk to others, but they need time for self-education as well. A good example of a self-educating prayer is the cry uttered by Imam Sajjad that was mentioned earlier. Reflecting on a prayer or section of a prayer can be done anywhere and at anytime. Isolated spirituality, when one goes to a mosque or church on one day and acts like a nonbeliever for all the other days is of no real benefit and is therefore not enough. Real spirituality must be present always and everywhere.

Prayer is the product of knowledge and it brings awareness. The awareness it brings is that humans are by themselves dead, empty and dark. Acknowledgment of this engenders humility in the human being and in turn, brings about obedience. But one who has self-centred pride, is ignorant, does not know reality, forgets where he came from and thinks he is his own master, disregards what God says and commits proud disobedience. An example is that of a child who grows and becomes a successful person. At that point, he only sees his present situation and forgets about his past. He becomes ungrateful towards his parents and those who have helped him on his way. In a person's relationship with God this situation is magnified because God has created everything for the human being's benefit and use. The child eventually becomes independent of his parents. He becomes stronger and more knowledgeable than them, but this is not the case with God. One is always dependent on God but if he begins to develop self-knowledge, realizing his own nothingness without God's grace, it will result in his obedience.

The knowledge or insight that follows prayer is referred to as discovery (*kashf*), witnessing (*shuhūd*) and seeing (*ru'yah*), (here meaning internal seeing or seeing with the heart). It is a type of knowledge not gained by external sensation, rational thought or indirectly through scripture. It is gained when a person touches the truth directly, without mediation. The highest form of this type of knowledge is revelation (*wahy*) received by the prophets. The knowledge is not the result of discursive thinking or life experiences, but what the prophet directly receives from God either via an angel or an audible voice or it is knowledge placed directly in his heart. According to Islamic teachings, revelation ceased with the death of Prophet Muhammad but mystical knowledge, which is at a lower level of importance, continues. For God is always ready to give knowledge to anyone who is properly prepared. One form of mystical knowledge is inspiration (*ilhām*) or the voice of God in a person's heart. The prophets also share this type of knowledge. Mystical knowledge is hidden from many people and not acquired through ordinary ways of gaining knowledge, even if one is a genius. Human faculties alone cannot gain this type of knowledge. During the receipt of this type of illumination, the person who receives this is almost passive. The decision about whom the illumination should be given to lies with God alone, even though one needs to prepare him/herself for it.

Mystical knowledge requires, along with prayer, the presence of moral or spiritual value in life. Not everyone deserves to receive this type of knowledge. In fact, the knowledge is a reward that the virtuous person may receive on earth. A person's inner eye is opened with the knowledge so that they are able to see and this is one of God's best and most pleasurable rewards for a human being. Of course, spirituality must not be sought for the sake of mystical experience or any inner pleasure; rather it must be sought only out of one's love for and obedience to Him.

The Qur'an says that God gives knowledge to those with whom God is pleased. One receives mystical knowledge on the condition of his faith and the cleansing of his soul. The Qur'an

states, *"Whosoever believes in God, He will guide his heart"* (64:11). It can therefore be concluded from this verse that God's guidance is the way to receive this knowledge. The Qur'an also says:

> *"If you are pious, God will give you furqān (the insight and wisdom to distinguish between truth and falsehood)."* (8: 29)

Thus, one learns that practicing a pious way of living will enable him to receive mystical knowledge. Those who live better and are closer to God will receive more illumination from Him Who is *"the light of the heavens and the earth"*. (24:35)

# Religion and Mysticism

**Abolfazl Sajedi**

This paper investigates the nature of the relationship between religion and mysticism. For this purpose, and in order to avoid misunderstanding, the concepts of religion, theoretical and practical mysticism and religious and secular mysticism will first be clarified. Different aspects of the relationship between religion and mysticism will then be inspected and categorized into four groups that discuss cases where mysticism comes prior to religion, cases where it is posterior, times when it is in harmony with religion and times where there is cooperation between the two.

## What is religion?

Since there are various kinds of religions, having a comprehensive definition that includes all religions is difficult. Sometimes religion means a kind of internal and personal experience which most people have encountered. As Robert Hume expresses:

> "religion is so simple that any intelligent and mature child can experience a real religious experience; and it is so comprehensive and complicated that it is necessary to experience and analyze it in order to be able to completely understand it and benefit from it."[1]

Since there are so many definitions suggested for religion, some believe it is not even possible to present a complete list of them.[2] As a result of the diversity of religions and the differences between them it is difficult to find a common point. Examples of the contradictions between religions can be seen when comparing primitive religions with divine and systematic religions; religions that have God with the ones that do not; human religions (which can include any human ideology) with divine religions that have one God or multiple gods; personal religions with the ones that consider social matters; religions that divide matters into holy and unholy with religions that do not.[3]

In my view, religion is a collection of descriptive and normative propositions. The first describes the beings (how things are) and the second gives norms (what should be done). Both try to provide the path to human perfection and to provide guidance. If the propositions are correct and comply to reality the religion is true and acting according to its propositions has enough validity; otherwise it is a false religion. Religious propositions are obtained by reason or through revelation and they result in belief and special mental and corporeal deeds.

**The goals of divine religions**

What is the goal and purpose of the Prophets? The Qur'an mentions some, such as purifying the humans, teaching them their holy book and explaining the realities of the world to them:

> *"God certainly favoured the faithful when He raised up among them an apostle from among themselves to recite to them His signs and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error."* (3: 164)

Another verse points to teaching the unknown to people and educating them:

> *"As We sent to you an apostle from among yourselves, who recites to you Our signs, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you what you did not know".* (2: 151)

Reminding people is one of the reasons why raising prophets was necessary. The Quran calls itself and the other divine books "*dhikr*, *dhikrā*, *tadhkirah*, and *mudhakkir*" (all derived from "*dhikr*" which means reminding or remembrance) to emphasize this point. Imam Ali (peace be upon him) has said that reminding people about the forgotten blessings of God, reviving the forgotten divine nature of humans and awakening their innate nature are some of the goals of the revelation and the Prophets.[4]

According to the Prophet of Islam, the reason for sending down the revelation is to compensate the failure of human beings in achieving ethical and spiritual perfection. He said, "I was raised to complete the noble traits of character".[5] This short message shows that the Prophet's mission was not to teach the first steps for moral perfection of humans; rather it was a supplementary role that could not be fulfilled without revelation.

## What are mysticism (*'irfān*) and sufism?

In order to understand the relationship between religion and mysticism, it is necessary to define mysticism and since the two expressions of mysticism and Sufism have very close meanings, both of them will be defined in this section.

There are many definitions for Sufism. 'Abd al-Rrazzaq Kashani believes Sufism is the possession of divine ethics.[6] Tahanavi differentiates between the three expressions of *Sufi*, *mutasawwif*,

and *mustawsif*. According to him, a Sufi is a person who is annihilated in God and free from the world of nature and has joined God or *haqiqat al-haqā'iq* (the reality of all the realities). A mutasawwif is a person who has not achieved this position but is trying to do so. A mustawsif is a mystic-like person who has adopted a Sufi appearance in order to achieve worldly position and status.[7]

There are many definitions for mysticism (*'irfan*). For example, in the Section IV (*al-namaṭ al-tāsi'*) of *Al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbihāt* (a masterpiece on Islamic mysticism), Avicenna defines 'irfān by differentiating between *'ārif* (mystic), *'ābid* (worshiper), and *zāhid* (ascetic) as follows. Zāhid is a person who does not pay attention to worldly benefits and results. 'Âbid is a person who insists on praying. 'Ârif is a person who does not pay attention to anything other than God and yields his heart to God to let God's light shine on it. Avicenna believes that it is possible for a person to have two of the above titles or even to have all three of them.[8] He also writes:

> "Irfān starts by the separation of essence and attitudes and continues with ignoring anything other than God and is completed by forgetting ourselves and annihilating ourselves in God and reaching the status of union, which is the union of God's attributes."

Ibn Arabi considers 'irfān to be knowledge about God's essence and his eternal attributes.[9] He believes the discussions of 'irfān are as follows:

> "How God created plurality and how this plural returns to God; explaining the manifestations of God's names and attributes and how people return to Him; how the journey of a wayfarer, his attempts and mortifications should be; what the result of the deeds and remembrance of Allah in

this and the next world is and how they are established in reality." [10]

On the same subject, Ayatollah Javadi Amuli writes:

> "Irfān has two main tasks: 1. explaining monotheism; 2. explaining a monotheist. A perfect man is the one who has not only reached the unity of intuition (*wahdat-e shuhūd*); rather he has reached the personal unity (*wahdat-e shakhṣi*) of existence as well. Not only does he see the One Being as always with himself, but he sees himself, as God's absolute Governor, at God's service; because the first degree of perfection that resulted from getting close to God is guardianship (wilāyah) and the last degree is being with God and not being absent from Him."[11]

'Irfān can be considered as a science that deals with four types of knowledge: God's names, attributes and manifestations; description of God and the resurrection; the realities of the world and explaining how they return to the One Reality or God; the mystical path and the instruction for freeing ourselves from small trammels and joining God and becoming absolute and universal.[12]

## The difference between tasawwuf and 'irfān

Some believe that the difference between tasawwuf and 'irfān is due to their different cultural and social aspects. Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari maintains: "If we call the people on the mystical path by their cultural titles they are 'ārifs and if we call them by their social titles they are Sufis."[13] Thus, we can look at the people who are on the mystical path from two perspectives. From one perspective they are mystics and from another they are Sufis. The cultural aspect of mysticism makes it one of the

branches of culture and Islamic sciences. Thus, an 'ārif plays a social role just like exegetes of the Qur'an, narrators of hadith, jurisprudents, theologians, philosophers and poets. But unlike the other cultural groups, the 'ārifs have a joint social group as well, who have their own social customs in terms of clothing, hair dressing and face adornments and gathering in monasteries.[14] 'Irfān and *tasawwuf* can be differentiated in another way as well; that is to say the former is theoretical and the latter is more practical. A wayfarer is called "'ārif" if we are more concerned with his theoretical ideas and is called "sufi" if we are more concerned with his practical endeavours.[15]

Sometimes "Sufi" and "dervish" are regarded as synonymous and thus belief deviations, custom deviations and other inappropriate acts of the dervishes are attributed to Sufis, but a mystic is never considered similar to a dervish. Nevertheless their names are not that important; rather their deeds are important. A good criterion for evaluating them is to see how their sayings and deeds correspond with valid sources of revelation.

## Different kinds of mysticism

Mysticism is divided into the theoretical and the practical. Similar to philosophy, theoretical mysticism is knowledge with specific subject, base and questions; but unlike philosophy, it reasons on the basis of what is called intuitional principles and then explains them according to reason. A mystic explains his understandings, seen by his eyes or intuited by himself, through reasoning to make his experience available for others. Therefore, theoretical mysticism is an acquired knowledge which explains the realities of the universe discovered by intuition.[16] Practical mysticism on the other hand, is the actual process of passing through different stages to reach to the position of annihilation (*fanā*) and to reach God (*wisāl*). Practical mysticism actualizes theoretical mysticism; it also provides the situation to explain its questions.[17] Furthermore, it is necessary to differentiate between practical

mysticism and the knowledge of practical mysticism. Even though they are used as synonyms due to negligence in some cases, the first one is practically passing through some steps and the second one is a scholarly analysis of passing through the course.[18]

Sometimes mysticism is divided into religious and secular mysticism and also superior and inferior mysticism. The difference between religious and secular mysticism will be discussed but the discussion about superior and inferior mysticism will be postponed until later and will appear under the section "relationship between religion and mysticism". This is because it has a special position in defining the relationship between religion and mysticism.

In this paper whenever the term "mysticism" is used, it should be taken to mean religious mysticism, in the same way that religion should be taken to mean divine religion.

## Secular and religious mysticism

According to historical reports, the common mysticism before Renaissance has been mostly religious mysticism. Secular mysticism was practically introduced after this period, even though its theoretical foundations had been created long ago. Its advocates claim that there is a contrast and sometimes a contradiction between religion and mysticism. The features of secular mysticism, which make it different from religious mysticism, are discussed below.

## The features of secular mysticism

**Materialistic Look at the World:** Similar to other modern schools of thought of the period of modernism and post-

modernism, secular mysticism takes a materialistic look at the world through different fields such as ontology, anthropology, epistemology, semantics, sociology, psychology and so on. It tries to control nature in order to fulfil worldly needs. Secular mysticism sees only one of the aspects of the world; it restricts the world to the material. Therefore there is no talk about God, servitude, prophethood or resurrection.

Religious mysticism, on the other hand, takes materialism as a delusion. The belief instead, is that the material is a small part of the universe (the answer to materialism will be mentioned later in the section on 'Science and Religion'.)

**One-dimensional look at the human being:** Secular mysticism applies a one-dimensional look at human being as well. It restricts the human to the body and substance. If some matters cast doubt on this issue, they are not taken seriously. Secular mysticism's main emphasis is therefore on the material. Religious mysticism, however, sees the human being as a two-dimensional being that has a soul besides its body, a noble soul, and acknowledges that the human is not an animal. The Qur'an mentions the two aspects of human beings while explaining the creation of them:

> *"Who perfected everything that He created, and commenced man's creation from clay. Then He made his progeny from an extract of a base fluid. Then He proportioned him and breathed into him of His Spirit, and made for you the hearing, the sight, and the hearts. Little do you thank."* (32:7-9)

According to religious mysticism, the divine soul is noble, celestial and eternal. This super-natural being survives even after the decomposition of the body and either deserves eternal felicity or eternal misery. If attention is to be paid to the combinational nature of the human being and his multi-dimensional being, it will be necessary to have a comprehensive view of both dimensions. Therefore, if one of the aspects of the human being is

neglected and there is no comprehensive perspective in the mystical view, it will be similar to a blighted tree that does not bear fruit; it will lead to secular mysticism. The comprehensiveness of religious mysticism leads to the recognition of both the natural and spiritual aspects of the human, enables training and produces an extensive schedule for human life. Many narrations have emphasized the combination of corporeal and mental needs, internal and external needs and have introduced a pious person as someone who has an appropriate attitude towards different aspects and has esoteric and exoteric purification.[19]

In order to avoid being one-dimensional, one should pay attention to the correlation between body and spirit. The physiological situation of the human affects his mental state and on the other hand, his mental calmness or stress affects his body. After accepting this reality, it is necessary to know how this relationship works and how the two should correlate in order to transcend the spirit and create a mystical path; and to know this, attention should be paid to these rules.

The Quran speaks of the correlation between a human's attitude and his soul. In the following verses, the heart does not refer to the corporeal heart in the chest, but rather it denotes the human soul.

> *"No indeed! Rather their hearts have been sullied by what they have been earning."* (83: 14)

> *"Then, because of their breaking their covenant We cursed them and made their hearts hard: they pervert words from their meanings, and have forgotten a part of what they were reminded. You will not cease to learn of some of their treachery, excepting a few of them. Yet excuse them and forbear. Indeed Allah loves the virtuous."* (5: 13)

Even food affects the states of our soul. For this reason Imam Ali (pbuh) says eating too much food will cause a hard heart and brutality[20] and eating a reasonable amount of some foods - such as lentils - will cause a compassionate heart[21].

**Looking at an instrument as the goal:** The motive of religious mysticism is to make the mystic a perfect human (like the Prophet of Islam) and to get close to God; but secular mysticism or the new age mysticism has a different goal. Since it is based on humanism, it does not have any goal beyond this world. Its goal is to achieve unnatural powers such as curing, mental calmness and overcoming stress. As religious mysticism believes, secular mysticism looks at an instrument as the goal. In fact what secular mysticism pretends is its goal is just an instrument in religious mysticism, for more important goals. The latter's view is based on God-centrism and on human perfection being much beyond what secular mysticism imagines. It shows that a human's real perfection lies in achieving spiritual perfection and having great human characteristics. As the Quran says, receiving the spirit from God makes a human worthy of the angel's bow:

> *"So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him."* (38:72)

In another verse, God blesses himself for the creation of human being and says, *"So blessed is Allah, the best of creators!* (23:14)" at the point when He joins the spirit to the body.

The perfection of any being, including the human, is due to the actual fulfilment of his typical potentialities and talents. Fulfilment of worldly wills is certainly not human perfection. Since the human has great potentialities, fulfilment of a small part of them, which are impermanent and temporary, is not equal to flourishing the real identity of a human, which is the immortal spirit desiring to last forever. Humanity is actualized only when his immortal psyche flourishes, and achieves perfection and endless and undisturbed joy. In other words we can say the final

perfection of a human is the point after which no perfection can be imagined for him. This point is where the connection with the highest being is understood or God's nearness is arrived at.[22]

Due to the high potentialities of the spirit, paying attention to the less important aspects of a human being is not necessary except when it is an instrument for achieving the higher degrees. On this basis, religious mysticism thinks of the major goals and considers worldly goals as mere instruments.[23]

Paying attention to major goals does not make a mystic lose less important benefits; rather religious mysticism helps the human to benefit from worldly joys as well; it gives him higher abilities and calmness of psyche; it also gives him heavenly ascent, makes him familiar with celestial beings and moves him closer to becoming a perfect human. On the other hand, secular mysticism pretends to be independent of revelation and provides the maximum earthly benefits for humans, on the basis of humanism, in the same way as secular rationality and scientism, but leaves the human alone at the middle of the path because it is not able to help him the rest of the way.

**Denying the authority of revelation:** One of the main differences between religious and secular mysticism is their trustable sources and authorities. Religious mysticism accepts religion's authority as an unearthly source but secular mysticism does not validate anything except the human's immediate and acquired knowledge. It will thus encounter some faults because it does not benefit from revelation and the source of human knowledge is limited and fallible.

**Separation of this world and the hereafter:** The relation between this world and the hereafter are meaningless in secular mysticism. However, religious mysticism believes in the resurrection in its ontology, and connects this and the next world for controlling human behaviour. It says this world is a farm for

the hereafter; it is a limited and introductory period of time for self-training, actualizing talents and becoming closer to God. The temporary conclusion of our life can be seen in this word but the stable and eternal result will be seen in the next world. The Qur'an points to this world as a laboratory in which people are tested and the pure and guilty people or the aware and unaware people are distinguished.[24]

Secular mysticism separates this world and the hereafter instead of joining them together. It therefore brings about a person who only sees this world and does not care about the next, or a person who is careless about the world. A religious mystic looks for the intuitive knowledge of the resurrection as well as the intuitive understanding of God and the origin. In this complicated world, he does not forget the delicate relation between the world and the hereafter but he solves its problems for himself. He does not want to make his heart devout to the world. Instead, he gradually decreases his connection to the world and increases his relation to God. The Qur'an and narrations deprecate looking at this world as separate from the hereafter whether it is by a small or a large amount. Even the smallest and most important part of this world should be seen the same; breathing, eating and dressing for example, should be seen as the means for divine purposes and getting closer to God.

**Lowering the position of the psyche:** Religious mysticism pays great attention to the position of the human psyche but secular mysticism reduces its position. According to the religious view, God has given a high status and a special reverence to the human in this world and has given him special gifts and potentialities. His internal and external abilities and talents are somehow that he can use nature and the other beings to reach to his goals. The Qur'an says that the human being has a divine genetic reverence:

> *"Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given*

*them an advantage over many of those We have created with a complete preference."* (17: 70)

Religious mysticism draws our attention to the high position of the human being. If he recognizes his position correctly and notices his special blessings, he will never pollute his being;[25] rather he will see himself as responsible for his blessings and will be loyal to his divine promises. Religion helps the mystic to derive the maximum benefit from the available facilities to keep his position and to achieve his goals. In fact it saves him from devoting and sacrificing himself for facilities and instruments.

## The purpose and style of mysticism

Mystics desire intuitive knowledge of God and want to get close to Him and be in His presence. Going towards God, in their opinion, is the purpose of human existence. There is a close relationship between knowing God's names, attributes and signs and knowing the realities of the world, the origin and resurrection and how all these return to God. In order to reach to the final goal, one should pass through the intermediate goals such as purifying the heart from darkness (anything other than God), passing through the mystical journey and attempting to liberate the soul from the trammels of unimportant matters. To achieve mystical goals, one should go through the religious and mystical steps and get to reality through intuition. Mysticism prefers the intuitive way of achieving knowledge rather than the rational way. Although intuitive knowledge is not valid for anyone except the mystic who has actually achieved it, it is better than the rational knowledge in some aspects. For example, it can be considered immediate knowledge or something close to it, which is much better than acquired knowledge for a scholar. This is because acquired knowledge is the result of reason and demonstration, which is called the knowledge of certainty (*'ilm-al-yaqin*), but immediate knowledge is present in the heart and soul and is called visual certainty or the truth of certainty (*'ayn* or

*haqq al-yaqin*), depending on the degree of the knowledge. Knowledge has different degrees, like light and being, and intuitive knowledge is the highest degree of knowledge.[26]

## The relationship between religion and mysticism

Mysticism has both theoretical and practical achievements; it includes cognition and practical instructions. On the other hand, religion covers these two aspects as well. How are these two related? The answer to this question depends on the kind of religion and mysticism considered because both include various kinds, the relationship between them is only clear after determining the meaning of each one.

The base of this discussion is the religion of Islam as the best religion. There are different perspectives regarding the Qur'an and the narrations. The formalist perspective, adopted by the Salafites, Hanbalites and Traditionalists, is different from the perspective of philosophers and mystics. Each perspective has its own outcomes; the maximal rationalist method will yield different results to the religious devotional method. The basis of this discussion is the moderate rational method which was explained and accepted previously.

In addition to the different understandings of religion, there are different kinds of mysticism as well. According to one division, mysticism is divided into the higher and the lower. Here higher mysticism means religious mysticism based on the revelation.

The relationship between religion and mysticism is as follows: lower mysticism precedes religion and is not based on it and higher mysticism is subsequent to religion and is based on it.

**Lower mysticism comes prior to religion:** There is much evidence to show that there is a kind of mysticism that has priority over religion, meaning that it does not necessarily refer to

religion. The human being has always been interested in mystical growth. He has passed through some steps using his human resources and has arrived to certain conclusions as well.

Evidence for this claim is that there are common points among the mysticism of different divine and non-divine religions and cults. These common points have resulted in the application of similar expressions between different nations in the past. Nearly all of the following matters can be found in the different mystical perspectives: annihilation, love, intuition, enduring mortification, the small and big worlds and the relationship between the two and the symbolic expression of intuitive understanding. For example, there are some principles and levels such as wakefulness, vigilance, need for a master and annihilation which are accepted in Islam as well. Mystical experiences are not exclusive to the believers of revealed religions; rather the believers of non-revealed religions have also had some mystical experiences. Some believe that the essence of these religions is their mystical experiences. Mystical experiences can be observed in Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism or in fact, in all the Asian religions and also in some primitive religions.

The common mystical experiences among believers of various religions are due to their common nature and mentality which is such that they all tend to pay attention to supernatural matters and accept some common statements of the practical and theoretical intellect. Therefore, whenever someone looks and thinks about the world from a mystical perspective or gives an instruction for practical mystical steps, their conclusions and the ideas they come up with are similar and sometimes the same as those of someone else from a different religion.

Furthermore, the priority of mysticism over religion is also shown by the fact that the validity of religion is based on the validity of rational and intuitional methods or the validity of true immediate or acquired knowledge that is intrinsically valid. Proving the existence of God through nature eventuates in a kind of intuition.

Although intuition and immediate knowledge are only personally valid, they are the initial steps for accepting religion. Obeying the rules of religion is necessary only after proving God and prophethood by reasoning or intuition. Partial acceptance of the validity of the intuitive method and its priority over religion is the same as priority of mysticism over religion, because mysticism is based on the intuitive method.

The above evidence shows the relative priority of mysticism over religion. It also shows that the existence of common concepts between religions does not necessarily prove that one has imitated the other. Therefore, it is not correct to say that all the teachings of Islamic mystics are rooted in non-Islamic cultures and schools or in Platonic philosophy and vice versa. In addition, these sayings can be seen among the teachings of the Prophets as well.

Since there is a kind of mysticism that has priority over religion, mystical intuitions and states and spiritual experiences of mystics are not necessarily the result of their belief and piety. These consequences are the result of the rules dominant in the world. Whoever follows special instructions for mortification and disciplines his life, will achieve extraordinary abilities. The priority of mysticism over religion opens the possibility of talking about religious and non-religious mysticism.

Ibn Arabi, one of the forerunners of mysticism, describes the two kinds of religions (divine and human) as follows:

> "There are two kinds of religions: the first is divine religion and second is human religion. A divine religion is such that God, his prophet and his successors invite people to it; and a human religion is invented by humans and confirmed by God. God has selected the divine religion and has made it better than the human religion... The process of monasticism and mortification invented by humans includes a collection of rules and

> principles based on wisdom that is not delivered by any prophet in any of the known divine laws or procedures. But since its rules and principles are in accordance with the legal system of divine laws, God has confirmed it like the other divine and legitimate religions... Those who obey this process of mortification will be fortunate and those who disobey it will displease God."[27]

The above quote highlights two points: a. the priority of mysticism over religion; b. if the principles of human monasticism are in harmony with religion, then they are accepted and confirmed by it.

Although a certain degree of mysticism comes prior to religion, having confidence in the path and getting access to the highest degrees of mysticism depends on valid revelation. Some services of religion to mysticism will be reviewed in the next section in order to confirm this idea and show the reasons for preferring religious mysticism to other kinds of mysticism.

**The services of religion to mysticism**

**1. Rejecting secular mysticism**

Religion deals with mysticism primarily by rejecting secular mysticism and correcting its flaws. Religion liberates mysticism from a materialistic look at the world and a one-dimensional look at human beings, thereby heightening the human being's goal and preventing him from restricting himself to this world. Religion provides the human being with an authentic source of revelation and makes him aware of his high position.

## 2. Providing the necessary knowledge

One of religion's services to mysticism is that it provides the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge for it.

**2.a. Comprehensive and authentic ontology:** The mystic's goal is to get close to God and his method is intuition and immediate knowledge. How can he deepen and strengthen his goal and method? Superior mysticism should have the information of the world, the human being and the beginning and end of existence in order to be complete, true and according to the world's realities. If this is not the case, mystic statements will not have a strong base or enough stability. The main problem of secular mysticism is that it does not have the correct knowledge of the world and of human beings. The more complete the initial acquired knowledge is, the closer mysticism comes to its correct path. Authentic revelation gives some information to the human being, which helps him to establish a superior mysticism and a new design.

**2.b. Providing reliable instruction for the mystic's journey and an infallible leader:** Real mysticism, which considers the mystic's journey to God as the goal of human existence, should have trustable instruction for it. It cannot ignore the celestial manners for the journey and in fact, trustable instruction is considered an essential tool for passing through this path. How is it possible to move towards God without paying attention to his message? Therefore, the passengers of the mystic journey need a leader to tell them the essential suggestions received from God by revelation and to show them the threats that lie in the path and move them towards their destination. In order to have such a leader, revelation is necessary. The outstanding mystic of the eighth century, Sayyid Haydar Amuli, believes that in order to become aware of the divine realities, revelation is necessary. He says: "the mystics believe prophecy makes us aware of the divine realities which are knowledge of God's essence, names, attributes and commands."[28] The late Imam Khomeini also stated that introducing God to human beings is the main mission of

revelation and prophethood. He said: "all the goals of the prophets are somehow to know God. In reality, they were looking to understand God."[29]

Further explanation of most of the necessary knowledge provided by religion for mysticism is based on knowing the following two subjects:

***Tariqah, shari'ah* and *haqiqah*:** Islam provides some introductory knowledge and necessary instruction for the mystics to help them through their journey to get closer to God and become unified with Him. The triangle of the tariqah (mystical path), shari'ah (divine law) and haqiqah (reality) is formed here, which has an important role in the attainment of higher mysticism. According to this triangle, real and higher mysticism can be achieved only under the control of true divine law.

Sayyid Haydar Amuli asserts that it is necessary to act according to the shari'ah to get to the stage of union with God. He believes that the practical teachings of the divine saints and the prophets, from Adam until the Imam Mahdi, are necessary for everyone, corresponding to his talents and potentials, to free himself from the darkness of ignorance and enter the light of knowledge and spiritual perfection. He quotes the following verse as a reminder:

> *"As We sent to you an Apostle from among yourselves, who recites to you Our signs, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you what you did not know."* (2:151)

He believes the shari'ah is a divine contract which is obligatory for the wayfarers of the mystical journey, including the prophets, the saints and the Ummah (Muslim nation) to successfully attain the two stages of the tariqah and the haqiqah.[30]

Amuli asserts that the three sides of the above triangle are the three aspects of religion, and explains that the shari'ah is a divine

path which includes religion's basic and subsidiary commands. The tariqah is going through safe and stable ways and the haqiqah is proving things by discovering them, making them concrete and conscientious. In other words, the shari'ah is confirming the deeds of the prophets in the heart and obeying them. The tariqah is achieving their morals, obeying their deeds and fulfilling their rights and the haqiqah is observing the states of the prophets and achieving their attributes. These three fields are the three levels of one reality; yet the difference between them is that the degree of the haqiqah is higher than that of the tariqah, which is in turn higher than the shari'ah.[31]

Sayyid Haydar says real mysticism is the highest degree of Islam. He explains the degrees as follows: Islam has three levels: I. submission, II. belief, and III. certainty. Each of the levels has three steps (the shari'ah, the tariqah and the haqiqah) for the three groups: beginners, intermediate and advanced. The people of each group have a degree of Islam, belief and certainty as outlined below:

**Submission of the beginners:** Attesting the two statements (there is no God except Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah) and accepting the five principles of religion without rasoning.

**Submission of the intermediate group:** Accepting the five foundations by reasoning or obedience. This group includes religious people who do not have worldly purposes and are free from apparent polytheism. This religion is called God's religion in the Quran:

> *"[O, men!] Pure Religion [of Monotheism] belongs to Allah [alone]".* (39:3)
>
> *Truly, the Perfect Religion in the Sight of Allah is Islam".* (3:19)

**Submission of the advanced group:** This belongs to the monotheists and the ones who have intuitive experience. This is the real Islam which is called the upright (Lasting and Right) religion. The Prophets, saints (*awliyā*) and their perfect followers obey this religion. Their religion is achieved through intuition which results in freedom from hidden polytheism.[32]

One of the mystics of the seventh century, Aziz al-Din Nasafi, writes about the advantages of being religious and acting upon the shari'ah and confirming the prophets:

> "When the human confirms the prophets and follows them, he reaches the position of faith and is called a faithful; and if he worships God a lot and divides his day and night and spends most of it in praying, he has reached the position of worship and is called a worshiper (*'ābid*). If he prays a lot and disregards the world, wealth and worldly position and forgets the joys and desires of his body, he has reached the position of asceticism and is called an ascetic (*zāhid*). If he gets access to knowledge and wisdom of the objects as they are, he has reached the position of knowledge and is called a mystic (*'ārif*). This is a very high position and only a few of the wayfarers reach this position and it is very close to guardianship (*wilāyah*). If he has the knowledge and God allocates His love and inspiration to him he has reached the position of guardianship (*wilāyah*) and is called *waliyy*. If he has love and inspiration and God allocates revelation and miracles to him and sends him to the people carrying His message to invite them to the right, he has reached the position of prophecy and is a prophet (*nabiyy*). If he has revelation and miracles and God allocates His book to him he has reached the position of *risālah* and is called an apostle (*rasūl*). If he has a book and abrogates the

previous shari'ah and institutes another one he has reached the position of *ulu'l-'azm* (Arch prophets) and is called an *ulu'l-'azm*. If he abrogates the previous shari'ah and institutes another one and God makes him the last prophet, he has reached the position of *khatm* (Seal of prophethood) and is called *khātam* (seal of the Prophets). This is the progress of the human soul."[33]

Nasafi respectively names the different levels of perfection as follows: faithful, 'abid, zāhid, 'ārif, waliyy, nabiyy, rasūl, ulu'al-azm and khātam. Therefore, the Seal of the prophets, who is in the last degree of human perfection, has reached this position because he is bound to religion and still respects it to the highest mystical degree. Based on this hierarchy, if a mystic becomes familiar with some mystical expressions and passes some steps and then claims to be independent of religion, he is floating in a false and imaginary mysticism.

## Superiority of prophetic experience over mystical experience

Esoteric experience and intuition is the source of a mystic's knowledge and his method of understanding realities. This method is one of the sources of knowledge which is recognised in Islam. There are many discussions about the essence of a mystic's religious experience and its relationship with revelation and the relationship of both of them with immediate knowledge. Although there are some similarities between the Prophet's experiences and the mystical experiences of others, their essence is not necessarily identical. Here we refer to some of the differences:

a. The Prophet's mystical experience was not restricted to the time in which he received revelation; rather it is due to his pure heart and high divine and spiritual position. He experienced spiritual states and mystical experiences during his prayers and

worship as well. In fact, because of his great spirit, his attention was mostly (if not always) with God and such experiences were usual for him, but he did not receive revelation during all of these instances. Revelation was only sent down to him in some special situations. Therefore, the descent of revelation did not depend on his spiritual state or mystical and religious experiences; rather it depended on the need of the Muslims for special guidance from God. If revealed experience was the same as mystical experience, all of the mystical experiences of the Prophet would be considered as revealed experiences and vice versa. In reality, he only named some of his experiences as revealed.

b. Some Qur'anic verses speak of the descent of revelation to the Prophet and of his mission of delivering them to others.[34] These verses show that revealed experience is not the same as mystical experience because God creates the mystical experience and the Prophet feels it. It is not possible to send this feeling down and for the Prophet to receive and deliver it. The Qur'anic verses show that in the process of receiving revelation, the Prophet learned the divine teachings with a view to delivering and explaining them to the people. For this reason the Qur'an is called *bayān*, *tibyān*, *bayyinah* and *bayyināt* (with the common root meaning explanation).[35] Revelation explains the divine teachings and transfers various statements, concepts, meanings and special teachings. In other words it has a cognitive aspect.

c. Religious and mystical experience is rather popular and it is not specific to the prophets. However, it is understood from the Qu'ran that revelation is special and specific to the prophets. The Qur'an says: "*Their apostles said to them, 'Indeed, we are just human beings like yourselves; but Allah favours whomsoever of His servants that He wishes.'*" (14: 11) This verse shows that the only special point about the prophets, which is not accessible for others, is the revelation sent down to them. Even the Imams, their successors, do not receive this sort of revelation.

d. Unlike revealed experiences, mystical experiences are acquirable. A mystic can pass some introductory steps to acquire mystical experience, but it is not possible to reach the position of the Prophet and attain His experiences by practice. Even the Prophet himself could not receive revelation at any time he wanted. Revelation was not sent to him on all the occasions that he paid attention to God and purified himself. The descent of revelation depended on God's will and the special situation which was suitable for a new teaching from God.

e. A mystical experience is explained by human words, meaning that a mystic chooses some expressions to explain and interpret his intuition. However, in the case of a divine revelation, the words and the meaning are both from God:

> *"Do not move your tongue with it to hasten it. Indeed it is up to Us to put it together and to recite it. And when We have recited it, follow its recitation."* (75: 16-18)

f. The occurrence of mystical experience does not depend on belief in Islam. It may also occur to followers of other religions such as Christians and even for those who have no faith and deny God. Revelation, on the contrary, is not sent down to those who deny God, and even among the believers it is only sent to the prophets.

g. The validity of the mystical experience (if any at all) is purely personal and is not valid for others because this experience is an internal feeling which occurs to some special people. There is no reason for others to accept the personal and internal feelings of others. The content of revelation, on the other hand, is valid and evident for all human beings through rational demonstrations, such as the necessity of prophethood and the descent of revelation for the guidance of human beings.

h. Rational proof shows that revelation should be sent down from a valid and infallible source. This point has extra-religious and

even intra-religious reasons, such as the following saying from God:

> *"This Qur'an could not have been created by anyone besides Allah; rather it is a confirmation of what was [revealed] before it, and an elaboration of the Book, there is no doubt in it, from the Lord of all the worlds. Do they say, 'He has fabricated it?' Say, 'Then bring a surah like it, and invoke whomever you can, besides Allah, should you be truthful.'"* (10: 37-38)

Mystical experience is exactly the opposite: its validity is not always obvious, even for the one who experiences it. The reasons for this are as follows:

**I.** In mysticism lots of misleading points may occur and it is not very simple to distinguish between the heavenly and satanic cases. For this reason most of mystics regularly remind their students not to consider all their intuitions to be heavenly. Depending on his mental, intellectual and environmental situation and his imagination and delusions, a mystic can acquire different and even contradictory satanic experiences. Therefore, the ones who are in this path should not pay attention to all their internal intuitions. They should evaluate them with some special criteria such as the divine revelation. Muhaqqiq Kashani in *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* mentions the dangers of the satanic journey in which one follows his desires.

Thus, although intuition is a kind of immediate knowledge or something close to it, and immediate knowledge is flawless, this point is only useful when the content of the immediate knowledge is reported correctly and the mystic does not add any of his thoughts, acquired knowledge and interpretation to it and does not reduce anything from it. In addition, his intuition should not be satanic.

**II.** Even in the cases where it is possible to be sure that the intuition is heavenly, there are different factors that affect how it is reported such as presuppositions, the amount of rational abilities, speech abilities and memory power. All these factors affect one's understanding and interpretation of one's intuitions.

**III.** A mystic might make a mistake in finding the extension of his intuition due to a disregard for rational rules or an intellectual weakness. This creates important problems. An example is the mistake of some mystics in considering the theory of metempsychosis as an extension of their intuitions.

**IV.** Different mystics may have different and even contradictory experiences. Obviously not all of them are valid. These conflicts drive a real mystic to examine his findings and distinguish between the real and non-real. In light of the above possibilities, it is recommended not to rely solely on experiences for deeds, knowledge or judgment of reality.

None of the above problems exist for prophetic experiences because the prophets do not change or make any mistakes in receiving revelation or in converting their immediate experience to concepts and words.

### 3. Religion provides mystical journey with sanctions

Socrates believed that knowing proper morals is enough for action, but this idea is not complete. Aristotle believed that mere knowledge is not sufficient for performing an action. He believed the important factor here is the weakness of will. This idea is correct because there are two aspects in human decision-making: knowledge and tendencies. Man does not necessarily perform what he knows. An unending problem of man is that sometimes he does not perform what he has accepted to be right and disregards the discovery of his practical intellect and the mystic's suggestions. Human tendencies simply suppress reason,

conscience and spiritual feelings. There are many people who know the rules of the mystical journey very well but do not follow them. They know what is good and bad and know that doing certain things is wrong but they do them anyway. For example, everyone knows the importance of family rights, helping parents, the old and the poor, but many people do not take any action in line with their knowledge. These cases show that knowing something does not provide enough strength for moving towards spiritual and mystical perfection.

In addition psychological research shows that a vast amount of people are not eager to do good and avoid bad without any encouragement or punishment. The reason is their expediency, self-centeredness and love for themselves, which is common among everyone in all matters, especially in ethical and mystical matters. Therefore, it is evident that a wayfarer of the mystical path needs a religion because most people do not purify their souls without some religious beliefs such as belief in God's justice, resurrection and inspection of their deeds.

Religion can ensure that people do good by promising them good things or threatening them with punishment to make them avoid the bad. Religion can tell them the effects and benefits of their life in this world and the hereafter and therefore encourage them to pass through the mystical journey. Receiving the revelatory words and believing in them gives a special strength to humans for the mystical move, which is not comparable to other internal and/or external motives. Everyone obeys God, the greatest Being, and the divine guardians, who are the best people on the earth. The reason for this is that they love them or because of promises or threats. Therefore, the best way to achieve intuition is to purify and experience a celestial growth of the soul, and religion is a good aid for this purpose.

## 4. Removing negligence

Although everyone is aware of spiritual values through reasoning and nature, many simply forget them and do not pay enough attention to their knowledge because there are many factors around them that create and encourage negligence. This is not restricted to the common people, but rather the mystics and the scholars have the same problem as well. Therefore, in order to have a celestial mystic journey, it is necessary to have a valid and holy source of reminder as well as an internal understanding. Religion is a good aid in this regard too.

## 5. Systematic comprehensiveness

Religious mysticism uses tradition and reason as well as intuition. It presents its intuition to revelation and reason and moves with more confidence as a consequence. It also becomes aware of satanic intuitions and is careful of them.

Religious mysticism does not restrict itself to interior meanings. It thinks of interior and exterior meanings together and does not neglect the link between them. It looks at the different exoteric aspects of a matter and finds the relationship between an individual and society, religion and politics, the world and the afterlife and presents all this in its mysticism. A religious mystic is not a hermit. He searches for God not just through his nightly worships but also looks for Him during his daily attempts and by expounding right and justice. His role model for life is the Prophet Muhammad who devoted his body and soul to the purification of society.

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[1] Robert Hume, *Live Religions of the World*, trans. by Abd al-Rahim Govahi, p. 18.

[2] Mircha Iliadeh, *Religious Research*, trans. by Baha al-Din Khorramshahi, p. 85.

[3] Cf: Lossky, 1991, p.856.

[4] *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon One.

[5] Majlesi, Mohammad Baqir, *Bihār al-Anwār*, Vol. 16, p. 210.

[6] Kashani, Kamal al-Din 'Abd al-Rrazzaq, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, edited by D. Mohammad Ibrahim, p. 156.

[7] Tahanawi, Mohammad A., *Kashshāf-u Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, edited by Mohammad Wajih, Vol. 1, p. 841.

[8] Avicenna, *Al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbihāt*, edited by Mujtaba Zare'i, pp. 355 & 356.

[9] Yathrebi, Sayyid Yahya, *'Irfān-e Nazari*, Part II: Interpretation and Analysis of Qeysari's introduction to *Sharh-e Tā'iyyah* by Ibn Fāriz, p. 216.

[10] Ibid. p. 218.

[11] Abdollah Javadi Amoli, *Tahrir Tamhid al-Qawā'id*, p. 55.

[12] Yathrebi, Seyyed Yahya, *'Irfān-e Nazari*, second part: interpretation and analysis of Qaysari's introduction to *Sharhe Tā'iyyah* by Ibn Fārez, p. 233.

[13] Motahhari, Mortada, *Majmu'eh Athār*, v. 23, pp. 25 & 26.

[14] Ibid.

[15] See Fa'ali, Mohammad Taqi, *Din va 'Irfān*, pp. 29 & 30.

[16] See Amini Nejad, Ali, *Introduction to Islamic mysticism* (unpublished), p. 6. Some scholars who have presented theoretical mysticism are Ibn Arabi in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* and Avicenna in the eighth and ninth Namaṭ of *Ishārāt*. Other scholars of this field are Ibn Turkeh in *Tamhid al-Qawā'id*, Ibn Qanawi in *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns* and Seyyid Haydar Amuli, Sadr al-Din Shirazi and Allameh Tabataba'i.

[17] See Javadi Amuli, Abdullah, *Taḥrir-e Tamhid al-Qawā'id*, p. 13.

[18] Ali Amini-Nejad, the notes of "Introduction to Islamic mysticism" class, p. 4 Motahhari, Mortada, *Majmu'eh Athār*, v. 23, pp. 29 & 30.

[19] Imam Kazem (pbuh) recommends Muslims to divide their day into four parts: one part for praying to God, one part for seeking sustenance, one for communicating with your brothers and trustable people who tell you your faults and one part of the day for permissible enjoyment. (Bahrāni, Ibn Shu'bah, *Tuḥaf al-'Uqūl 'an Al-e-Rasūl*, p. 409)

[20] Amudi, 'Abd al-Wāhid Amudi, *Ghurar al-Hikam va Durar al-Kalem*, p. 360.

[21] Nuri, Mirza Husay, *Mustadrek al-Wasā'il*, v. 16, p. 341.

[22] Mahmood Rajabi, *Insān henāsi*, pp. 222-226.

[23] *"To mankind has been made to seem decorous the love of [worldly] desires, including women and children, accumulated piles of gold and silver, horses of mark, livestock, and farms. Those are the wares of the life of this world; but Allah with Him is a good destination."* (3:14) *"The life of this world is nothing but the wares of delusion."* (3:185) *"Whatever things you have been given are only the wares of the life of this world and its glitter, and what is with Allah is better and more lasting. Will you not apply reason?"* (28:60)

[24] *"He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct.."* (11:7 & 67: 2) *"We may test them [ to see] which of them is best in conduct."* (18:7) *"and We will test you with good and ill by way of test, and to Us you will be brought back.."* (21:35)

[25] *"One who purifies it is felicitous, and one who betrays it fails."* (91: 9 & 10)

Imam Ali says: "Whoever honours himself his lower desires will become insignificant for him." (Majlesi, Mohammad Baqir, *Biḥār al-Anvār*, v. 67, p. 78.

[26] Ashtiani, Sayyid Jalāl al-Din, *Sharḥ-e Muqaddameh-ye Qayṣari*, pp. 51 & 52.

[27] Ibn Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ch. Ya'qubi, (8).

[28] Amuli, Sayyid Haydar, *Jāmi' al-Asrār va Manba' al-Anwār*, p. 379.

[29] Imam Khomeini, *Ṣaḥife-ye Nūr*, v. 7, p. 250.

[30] Amuli, Sayyid Heydar Amuli, *Asrār al-Shari'ah*, p. 129.

[31] Amuli, Sayyid Haydar, *Jāmi' al-Asrār va Manba' al-Anwār*, pp. 343-347.

[32] Ibid. pp. 591 & 592.

[33] Nasafi, 'Aziz al-Din, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*, correction by Marijal Mooleh, pp. 93 & 94.

[34] See e.g. 7:62- 68; 5: 67.

[35] 3: 38; 16: 89; 6: 157; 2: 185.

*None of My servants can seek proximity to Me by that which is dearer to Me than things that I have made obligatory to him. Then, with the performance of nawafil (the recommended acts), he continuously attains proximity to Me, so that I love him. When I love him, I will be the ear with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, and the hand with which he strikes. If he calls Me, I will answer his call, and if he makes a request, I will grant it.* (*Usul al-Kāfi*, vol. 2, pp. 352 & 353)

*I will love him when he loves Me and I will make him loved by My creation, and I will open up his inward eyes to My glory and grandeur, and I will not hide from him [the knowledge of] the select of My creation. So in the darkness of night and in the light of day, I will tell him secrets, so that his conversations with creatures and with his companions will be cut off. I will make him hear My words and the words of My angels and I will reveal to him the secret I have hidden from My creation.* (*Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 77, p. 28 & 29)